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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE THINGS THAT REMAIN:
PEOPLE, OBJECTS, AND ANXIETY IN THIRTIES BRITISH FICTION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

EMILY O'KEEFE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Christopher Isherwood

<i>CK</i>	<i>Christopher and His Kind</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Goodbye to Berlin</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Lions and Shadows</i>
<i>MNCT</i>	<i>Mr. Norris Changes Trains</i>
<i>PV</i>	<i>Prater Violet</i>

Jean Rhys

<i>ALMM</i>	<i>After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie</i>
<i>GMM</i>	<i>Good Morning, Midnight</i>
<i>LB</i>	<i>The Left Bank and Other Stories</i>
<i>VD</i>	<i>Voyage in the Dark</i>

Evelyn Waugh

<i>BM</i>	<i>Black Mischief</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>The Complete Stories of Evelyn Waugh</i>
<i>DF</i>	<i>Decline and Fall</i>
<i>EAR</i>	<i>Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh</i>
<i>HD</i>	<i>A Handful of Dust</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Letters of Evelyn Waugh</i>
<i>VB</i>	<i>Vile Bodies</i>

Elizabeth Bowen

<i>B</i>	<i>The Bazaar and Other Stories</i>
<i>BC</i>	<i>Bowen's Court</i>
<i>DH</i>	<i>The Death of the Heart</i>
<i>HP</i>	<i>The House in Paris</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>The Last September</i>
<i>PPT</i>	<i>People, Places, Things</i>
<i>TN</i>	<i>To the North</i>

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THINGS AND THE THIRTIES

In Nancy Mitford's *Wigs on the Green* (1935), the courting Jasper Aspect and Poppy St-Julien discuss the advent of political ideologies such as Nazism and Communism in Europe. *Wigs on the Green* is a comic novel—albeit one that focuses on the rise of fascism in Britain, with an underlying awareness of the dangers it presented—but the exchange includes some of the dark rhetoric that was becoming common in the thirties.

“I am inclined to think that the Western civilization we know needs putting out of its agony as soon as possible. It is old and tired, the dark ages are practically upon us anyhow, and I should prefer that they march in with trumpet and flag than that they should creep upon us to the tap of the typewriter. I am at heart, I suppose, a Nihilist.”

“I don't know what that is,” said Poppy.

“No! But then you are a girl with a very limited outlook, aren't you?”

“I'm not.”

“Oh! yes, you are. Like most women you only care about personalities, things don't interest you.”

“That's simply not true. I'm fearfully interested in things—I absolutely long for a sable coat.” (98–99)

Jasper's millenarian invocations of the death of Western civilization and the coming of the dark ages were echoed by many from all over the political spectrum in interwar Britain. The scars of the First World War were still visible, and the late twenties and thirties saw the publication of several memoirs of that conflict (including Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, published in 1929, and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which

came out in 1933). Despite the lingering awareness of the horrors of that war and the resulting efforts of many people to promote peace, commentators throughout the thirties—even very early in the decade—thought that another war was inevitable. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, George Orwell’s novel from the year after *Wigs on the Green*, Gordon Comstock thinks of “the great death-wish of the modern world...Enemy aeroplanes flying over London, the deep threatening hum of the propellers, the shattering thunder of the bombs” (24). The historian G. N. Clark mused, in 1932, that the “commonest phrases we hear used about civilization at the present time all relate to the possibility, or even the prospect, of its being destroyed” (qtd. in Overy 15).

Like Mitford’s Jasper Aspect, many reacted to the bleak outlook of the times by affiliating themselves with a political or religious ideology, even an extreme one. Young writers such as Orwell, W. H. Auden, and Naomi Mitchison were eager to make their political positions a major part of their writing—a tendency that Virginia Woolf, speaking for a slightly older generation, criticized in her essay “The Leaning Tower.” Several other figures, including Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, went through religious conversions in the late twenties or early thirties.¹ Yet Poppy’s flippant response to Jasper’s references to political ideologies—to focus on things, like coats—was, as I will argue, also a common (and not always flippant) response to the atmosphere of dread and tumult.

While Mitford presents Poppy’s longing for a sable coat comically, numerous British novels of the thirties feature people who respond to the growing political and

¹ See Peter McDonald’s essay “Believing in the Thirties” for more examples of the importance of belief in a political or religious ideology during the 1930s.

social uncertainty of the times by focusing on material things that seem solid, permanent, and far removed from the realm of human affairs. This dissertation analyzes the appeal of things in interwar British literature (and particularly in the literature of those thirties writers often referred to as “late modernists”—a term I will discuss shortly). In exploring these thirties writers’ attraction to the material world, I draw on the recent “turn toward things” in literary criticism and some other academic disciplines. Like others who have analyzed thoughts about things in various time periods, cultures, and literary genres, I attempt to capture thirties British writers’ complex fascination with material things. Therefore, I show that despite this frequent appeal to the material world as a place of stability and comfort, many of these writers also recognized conflicting aspects of things, knowing (and fearing) that even seemingly impenetrable things could change as the world was changing around them. Yet although furnishings such as tables and chairs could warp, decay, become lost, or perish in the bombs of war, their ultimate remoteness from human society made them appealing and seemingly safe from the traumatic political and cultural changes that seemed to be on their way.

This focus on writers’ representations of things marks a significant departure from existing criticism of thirties British fiction, which centers most frequently on the writers’ and characters’ ideological commitments. Samuel Hynes’s landmark *The Auden Generation* (1979) noted the “moral commitment and discipline” of a generation for whom “writing became a mode of action” (13). More recent approaches to the work of the thirties writers echo and expand on this contention. Chris Hopkins, in his *English Fiction in the 1930s: Language, Genre, History* (2006), notes that much writing of the

time was characterized by “an aesthetics or politics in which writing had to engage the actuality of history now” (78). Many critics of interwar literature and culture have, indeed, simply neglected to mention the thirties writers or considered them a footnote to modernist writers more often associated with the tens and twenties (many of whom were, of course, still writing in the thirties). The cause of this neglect is often difficult to identify precisely. Anthony Shuttleworth suggests that it is due to the perception that the period is “too Marxist or too liberal, too blindly radical or too timorously conservative, too earnest or too superficial, too naïve or too cynically dishonest” (11). The writers are associated both with radicalism (in their politics) and conservatism (in their style). Andy Croft writes that the decade has long been associated with “bad politics and...poor writing” (147).

Certain individual writers associated primarily with the thirties, including in particular Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Bowen, and other women writers, have received renewed attention in the past decade or more. (While Rhys’s later *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been popular for a longer time, critical work about her thirties novels—her early works—has only recently begun to appear.) But the historic neglect of the writers most closely associated with this decade leaves room for much more exploration of their texts. Thing theory, which has been applied intriguingly to many different periods and genres, can produce a new look at the thirties writers, showcasing the discomfort of many with available political and religious affiliations and the search for a haven from a fast-changing world. In a time in which Orwell’s “enemy aeroplanes” seemed not far away, pondering the things that might remain after a catastrophic war allowed them to think

beyond the pressing questions of the present. Yet as they knew, the world of things and the world of people are deeply linked. Thinking about what things might remain even after war or another catastrophe also allowed these writers to consider the mark they were making on the world and how they and their society might be remembered.

There are no comprehensive critical explorations of things in the thirties, and only a small number of analyses of individual writers or works from the decade mention this interest in the material world. Many of the analyses that exist fail to engage with the potential of thing theory to explore the complex and sometimes conflicting facets of things. Differing perspectives of things offer ways of engaging with their muteness, and reveal how people make these mute things significant and meaningful. The project began because I wanted to explore things that talk. I was haunted by the beginning of Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning, Midnight*: “‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’” (9). These utterances can only be read as products of Sasha Jensen’s imagination, yet they are presented as if the bed and side table had literally spoken. The room’s question captures the ambivalent comfort provided by things: its reference to “old times” can be read as both comforting and mocking, a note of familiarity as well as a snide reference to the hours Sasha has spent with only a mute table and spare bed for company. In humanizing the things, Rhys also makes them enigmatic and forbidding—and darkly humorous. But things cannot, finally, talk; people can only speak through them. If things talk in some thirties texts, it is worth asking not only what they say but also who is urging them to speak, and why. Since the room’s speech actually comes from Sasha, it also reveals a human fascination with the enigmatic qualities of things, their seeming

ambivalence and coolness. Thirties writers have often been criticized for their ambivalence, from Virginia Woolf's characterization of them as "betwixt and between" ("Leaning" 142) to the more contemporary critical attitudes that Shuttleworth describes. This dissertation explores how thirties writers use things to work out their ambivalence—between so-called highbrow and lowbrow culture, between politics and art, between the previous generation and what was to come next. I argue not only that thing theory can illuminate readings of thirties literature but also that a new attention to these texts can meaningfully contribute to thing theory.

Defining Things, Objects, and Persons

When Jasper says, in Mitford's novel, that "things don't interest you," he is talking about ideas; when Poppy responds that she is "fearfully interested in things," she turns the discussion to objects. Mitford captures a duality of meaning in the word *things*, which reflects a duality in things themselves (or at least in the way we think and talk about them). Material things are attractive—and mysterious—to people in part because they are undeniably Other, because they are both close at hand and irretrievably remote. Their aloof exteriority can be threatening, making us wonder if they are hiding something or forming secret judgments about us. Yet when we talk or think about things, it is difficult not to consider them symbols or to reflect on what they tell us about the people who own or use them—to see them as, in some way, ideas. The very act of talking about a thing transforms it, to some extent, to conform to human systems of language and thought. Peter Schwenger, in his book about the seeming melancholy of objects and the melancholy response that they often induce in people who look at or talk about them,

suggests that the translation of a material thing into words or pictures is an act of mourning: “The very dynamic of representation involves loss, an absent object preceding its replication in the medium” (14). Though we use objects every day and shape their materials to meet our needs, they can still seem elusive or alien. As Daniel Miller claims, “objects are important...often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them” (5). Since we typically use objects in certain ways (for a practical function, or to remind us of an idea or person) we overlook other aspects of them, which only become apparent when we encounter them in unfamiliar ways. In momentary glimpses, we may confront those aspects of the material world that exceed or resist our usual ways of engaging with it.

Thing theory analyzes both how we experience the Otherness of things and how we attempt to make things more familiar. While definitions of the terms differ, most thing theorists adopt a distinction between an *object* and a *thing*. We see objects in terms of what they mean to us—in terms of their practical function—but things are more mysterious and slippery. Jonathan Lamb writes of the “difference between objects that serve human purposes and things that don’t,” elaborating that “things...are obstinately solitary, superficial, and self-evident...they communicate, but only with themselves” (xi). For Lamb, things are objects that have become “irrelevan[t] to any human system of value,” never to be defined as something other than debris ever again. While Lamb suggests that the transformation of an object into a thing is “final and irreversible,” I agree with others who suggest that a particular entity can continually shift from being an

object to being a thing and back again. A third potential category—which some theorists consider part of the object category—is that of the symbol.²

A simple example can help explain this distinction. If I have a pair of shoes that I wear frequently, the shoes function as objects. My thoughts about their physical qualities (their shape, size, materials, heft) principally relate to how I will use them—to how comfortable they will feel, how they will look when I wear them, and so on. If I lose a shoe and keep the other one for months or years, the remaining shoe may seem different, more alien, even hostile, since I no longer think about it chiefly in terms of how I will use it. It will become a thing rather than an object. Yet it can become an object again. I might find the other shoe and begin wearing both again. Or, more interestingly, the shoe could be used for some other purpose. I could use it as part of an art project. Thousands of years from now, a future culture could show the shoe in a museum as an example of how people used to live and dress. The shoe would be a different kind of object, used for a different purpose—until it became an unfamiliar thing again. This process can also be much briefer. Tripping over a shoe in a dark hallway makes the unidentified obstacle a thing; turning on the light and identifying it turns it back into an object. Bill Brown describes the continuing process as *reobjectification*, which describes the use of an object typically used for one purpose in a different way (“How” 964). This transformation,

² In other words, an object is defined by a human function. Some use the term *objects* exclusively to refer to material entities used for a practical purpose—a watch used to tell time, for example. Others expand the use of the term *objects* to refer to symbolic purposes of the entities, as well—as in a watch that reminds one of a great-grandfather and comes to be a symbol of him.

which calls attention to material qualities that are usually overlooked, causes moments of hesitation that allow us to briefly experience the item as both a thing and an object.³

This attention to the duality of things is what separates thing theory from previous approaches to objects in society. As Brown suggests in the introduction to the pivotal *A Sense of Things*, many literary critical approaches such as feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and Marxist theory have long used a toolbox of concepts to which things might seem to be a central part: use value, exchange value, reification, commodification, objectification. These terms all describe processes through which objects are traded and shared, or through which people are, at least figuratively, treated like objects. Yet as Brown argues, most critical work using concepts such as objectification and exchange value seems, in its own way, to “[leave] things behind, never quite asking how they became recognizable, representable, and exchangeable to begin with” (how, in other words, those things became objects, and may become things again). Until recently, many critics discussing such concepts did not pause to reflect on what a thing—and a person—actually is, or to ask why and how we define our human relationships through things.⁴

³ W.J.T Mitchell usefully explores the process of reobjectification in found-object art, which transforms one of the “indifferent,” “poor things” that surround us, “hidden in plain sight” (116, 114). These found objects, which either hold themselves aloof from symbolic meaning or attract a surplus of it, are framed in the same way as objects that are more typically considered to be symbolic, beautiful, or important. The disjunction between the frame and the thing—much more noticeable with found objects than in cases with beautiful or desirable objects—reveals the distance between *any* thing and its representation.

⁴ Other criticism may examine material things as symbols or as efforts to create verisimilitude through the “reality effect.” Elaine Freedgood points to the limitations of these approaches, noting that thinking of the “object as metaphor” places the thing “in symbolic servitude”—disregarding its material qualities—while thinking of the literary

This elision could be corrected, Brown suggests, by paying attention to texts that “ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4). This process involves looking at material entities in various ways: as objects, as things, and as symbols. As Lorraine Daston asserts, things are “simultaneously material and meaningful,” but “matter constrains meanings and vice versa” (17). This tension between matter and meaning informs the ambivalent fascination with things in thirties writing.

If it is difficult to navigate the precarious divide between the thing, the object, and the symbol, the distinction between a person and a thing can also be slippery. Miguel Tamen’s *Friends of Interpretable Objects* shows that in various times and places, including ancient Greece, entities such as statues could be made to stand trial and punished for crimes such as falling on and injuring people (80).⁵ While this example may seem quaint, the concept of a person is still not easy to define. Recent political debates have centered on whether corporations should legally be defined as “persons,” or whether a fertilized egg should be considered a person from the moment of conception. People can be offended at the destruction or vandalism of a thing that represents a person, as if the material contains some trace of, or has the power to affect, that person. The television program *Saturday Night Live* still does not show footage of Sinead O’Connor’s 1992 on-air destruction of a photograph of the Pope in reruns. That act—and the thousands of calls

object as part of the “reality effect” of the text can obscure the meanings each individual object has to the text and to the characters within it (11).

⁵ See also the work of Alfred Gell, who explores the hybrid status of artistic and literary works. As Gell suggests, it is difficult to avoid ascribing intentionality to such works—an intentionality that borrows from, but is not identical to, the intentions and feelings of the artist or writer and the viewer or reader.

of protest that followed it—shows the difficulty of mentally separating the categories of person, thing, and symbol; the paper she ripped was a thing that showed a person who is a symbol of an institution and belief system.

As Bruno Latour suggests, merely opening a newspaper opens up a world of semi-human, semi-object, semi-symbolic hybrids: nations, chemical reactions, corporations. This continuing mixture of the animate and the inanimate, Latour claims, shows that we are not as “modern” as we claim to be. He explores the contrast between the premodern or amodern groups (as represented in anthropologists’ accounts), for whom every trait of their society is “simultaneously real, social, and narrated,” and “modern” Western society, which separates nature from culture, or “microbes, missiles, and fuel cells” from the communities and belief systems in which they function (7). Arguing that “there has never been a modern world,” Latour argues that this separation is an illusion. He describes not subjects or objects but “quasi-objects” or hybrids, networks of different kinds of “actants” that, when combined, exert agency (47). Jane Bennett, who builds on Latour’s work, describes this “primitive” state of the modern world as an “underground cultural sense of nature” and of inanimate objects “as alive” (118). While Latour’s and Bennett’s work has a more scientific and sociopolitical orientation than Bill Brown’s, both approaches analyze the difficulty of engaging with supposedly lifeless material since it both seems to have life and is used and conceptualized by living people.

If seeing things as potentially animate or human primitivizes us (as Latour and Bennett claim), many “modern” technological developments have seemingly put us in danger of receding in time. Several recent books argue that the digitization of many parts

of our culture—books, newspapers, correspondence, musical recordings—cause people look at things in a new way. (Indeed, this development may be partly responsible for the new popularity of thing theory.) Some articulate a fear that digital tools and gadgets such as laptops, cell phones, and other handheld devices are gaining too much power over our lives, that we are becoming more intimate with them than we are with other people and that we increasingly identify ourselves with our things. Jaron Lanier’s *You Are Not a Gadget*, Kevin Kelly’s *What Technology Wants*, and Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* argue that the current state of affairs has made the definition of both a person and a thing increasingly unstable. Some, like Kelly, urge us to think of the Internet not as a series of wires but as a living, growing being with its own desires—a hybrid, in Latour’s terms. Others suggest that the distinction between a person and a thing is in danger of being lost and must be reestablished. Lanier writes, “When developers of digital technologies design a program that requires you to interact with a computer as if it were a person, they ask you to accept in some corner of your brain that you might also be conceived of as a program” (4).

Yet while these recent technologies have raised concerns about the distinction between a person and a thing, very similar questions arose in interwar Britain and the United States. The idea that new technologies could make people more like things or things more like people also attracted people to and repelled people from the gramophone and the film, as subsequent chapters will describe. Today, critics may refer to iPads as “magic,” but they do not necessarily suggest that these things bring people back to a primitive stage. However, critics in interwar Britain explicitly linked “modern” things

such as films to a “primitive” relationship with the world in which pictures and other things could talk and move and people were mystified by their magic. The linkage of modern things with the primitive was one way in which people bemoaned that the “dark ages are practically upon us anyhow,” as Jasper Aspect proclaims. The idea of cultural decline, then as now, was associated with what many saw as a realignment of the relationship between people and things—and this new relationship could be seen both positively and negatively. While the linkage of film and sound technology to the primitive began before the thirties, it remained prevalent and merged with other reasons for linking modern Britain to “primitive” times and cultures. In their musings about the shifting relationships between people and things, writers of the twenties and thirties were products of their time while also connecting to our continuing negotiations of what *objects*, *things*, and *people* mean, and how these concepts relate to one another.

Things, Objects, Persons in the Thirties

In recent years, thing theorists have offered new approaches to many different periods and genres, from the “it-narratives” of the eighteenth century, in which inanimate objects such as coins serve as main characters, to the way film seems to bestow life on objects by magnifying them, making them move and change.⁶ There has been an

⁶ See, for example, Mark Blackwell, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*; Cynthia Wall’s *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*; Julie Park’s *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England*; Deborah Wynne’s *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*; *Romanticism and the Object*, ed. Larry H. Peer; and Alan Ackerman’s *Seeing Things: From Shakespeare to Pixar. Things*, a 2004 volume edited by Bill Brown—drawn largely from a 2001 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, which he also edited—is a foundational thing theory text and contains chapters about Russian constructivism, Romanticism, and early film.

especially large number of analyses of things and modernism, of which the earliest (and most definitive) is Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998). This attention to modernist things is justified, as modernist writers often not only wrote about objects and their allure but also treated their own works as inviolable objects. Mao calls attention to the "image of the individual maker crafting the individual object" in modernist literature, arguing that the modernists saw their own texts as the works of artisans (12). Reversing a formulation from Oscar Wilde, he argues that modernist writers did indeed seek to "estimate a personality" by the "test of production," treating the creation of "solid objects" (their works) as a moral imperative (19). Similarly, Bill Brown suggests that modernist writers thought of "the work of art as a different mode of mimesis—not one that serves to represent a thing, but one which seeks to attain the status of a thing" (*Sense* 3). Yet the many recent critical accounts of things and modernism have neglected to address the representation of things in thirties writing, in the works of those writers often referred to as "late modernists."

The term "modernism" is, certainly, a contentious one, with critics defining it variously as an aesthetic distinction and as a historical one (or both). The precise dates given for the start and end of modernism also vary, and many critics simply consider young writers of the thirties, such as Auden and Isherwood, alongside older and more "major" modernists such as Woolf and Joyce. However, I think it is worth distinguishing between the two groups, if only on the basis that many young writers of the thirties themselves made (and were highly conscious of) the distinction. Stephen Spender wrote, "In this century, generation succeeds generation with a rapidity which parallels the

development of events...The 1920s were a generation to themselves. We were the 1930s” (139). Spender and others, including Isherwood and Elizabeth Bowen, described their simultaneous admiration for and desire to distance themselves from heavyweight older writers such as Woolf, Lawrence, and Joyce. As Keith Williams and Steven Matthews note in their introduction to *Rewriting the Thirties*, figures as different from one another as “Auden, Orwell, and [Winifred] Holtby” were all “on the one hand anxious to adapt pragmatically the legacy and, indeed, currency of modernism, and on the other to resist its perceived obscurantism and indifference to social and economic facts” (2). The writing and writers of the later interwar period are indeed a hybrid lot, occupying what Tyrus Miller calls the “no man’s land” between modernism and postmodernism (12).⁷ Even as we note their differences, however, we can see, in the novels, criticism, and other works of many thirties writers, a consolidation of the people and traits that would be associated with high modernism for decades to come: a fragmented and often ironic style as well as a perceived difficulty and resistance to the common mass of readers. Though thirties writers both criticize and admire these characteristics, they also express anxiety that they do not have anything worthwhile to offer in their own right.

I do not mean to overemphasize the difference between the “1920s generation” and the “1930s generation,” as Spender characterizes them. The four writers I consider here—Isherwood, Rhys, Waugh, and Bowen—shared many traits with writers such as

⁷ Kristin Bluemel describes the relationship between thirties and forties writers and modernists in her introduction to the recent volume *Intermodernism*, noting that the “artists, writers, journalists, and others who were active during the interwar and war years...until now, have been treated as modernism’s others, if they were treated at all” (6). She proposes the term *intermodernism* as a way of capturing these interwar writers’ conflicted relationship to modernism.

Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce, and many critical works that consider these writers together uncover important affinities between them. There was no definitive break between the two groups. But I think there is also value in considering these “thirties writers” together. In my approach to periodization, I follow the reasoning of David Blackbourn, who notes that we should acknowledge “strong continuities...even across the divide” of the borders we establish between time periods: “we must be able to hold two ideas in our heads simultaneously, one pointing to rupture, the other to continuity” (305). The four writers I discuss may be read as modernists, but reading them as “thirties writers” can bring out important similarities regarding the appeal of things in a decade marked by tension and change, for a generation often characterized by ambivalence and confusion.

Analyzing the approaches to things in the work of the thirties generation separately from the treatment of things in the works of earlier modernist writers is important for several reasons. One relates to the anxiety about war and the destruction of civilization I noted earlier. This anxiety was shared among many people of all ages and generations, but the young thirties writers often expressed it in a distinct way. The writers of this younger generation, including Mitford, Christopher Isherwood, and Evelyn Waugh, directly and frequently linked the appeal of things to the threat of a coming war. These writers grew up in the shadow of the First World War, and an anticipation of widespread violence and war colors their representation of material things. (This attention to the possibility of war is also a reason for considering British writers of this time period separately from American writers, since the effects of the First World War were experienced differently, and arguably more strongly, in Britain.) Henry Green, in *Pack*

My Bag, wrote of growing up with the “feeling my generation had in the war [of 1914], of death all around us” and of the related certainty that he would “be killed in the next” war (74). Green and others refer not only to the pervasiveness of death and chaos at the time of the First World War but also to the feelings of inadequacy and helplessness that resulted from being too young to fight or participate. As a result, they describe a feeling of passivity in the face of war.

This anxiety about war helped to shape the specific kinds of things featured in their works. Thirties writers often focused on a different kind of thing—or focused on different qualities of the thing—from the more indisputably modernist writers they followed. While Mao and Brown argue that modernists saw themselves as artisans at work creating solid, inviolable, distinctive objects, writers such as Waugh and Isherwood focused not on singular artworks but on kitschy knickknacks.⁸ The authors prize them not because they show the mark of a dedicated human maker but because they seem hardy, indestructible; they seem to hold themselves aloof from their surroundings, and thus seem likelier to survive whatever conflict might come. The improbable, even ugly, appearance of many of these things provides some comic relief in these novels—comedy that is also provided by the frequent presentation of human characters as themselves mere bodies, or things. The thing-based comedy, accompanied by the pervading dread of war and cataclysmic change, is part of the dark humor of many works of the time—what Lisa

⁸ This interest in kitschy, clunky, ugly everyday objects also differentiates interwar writers from more recent ones. In *Enchanted Objects*, Allan Hepburn points to the recent prevalence of narratives that recount the making of a distinctive, singular art object—such as Tracy Chevalier’s *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, John Updike’s *Seek My Face*, and Howard Norman’s *The Museum Guard*.

Colletta has termed the “comedic aggression” that makes these works “refuse to be overwhelmed by the absurdity and hopelessness that they represent” (6).

The thirties writers’ interest in kitschy or tasteless things also often reflects an ambivalence about their own work. For example, the novella *Prater Violet*, a fictionalized account of Christopher Isherwood’s screenwriting work on the cusp of the outbreak of the Second World War, includes a film crew with characters named Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence. The names implicitly encourage us to compare the narrator’s work on a crowd-pleasing melodrama to those writers’ more revered and obscurantist work, yet the novel makes no clear statement about the relationship of the narrator’s work to that of his predecessors.⁹

In the following chapters, I analyze the work of four thirties writers who continually question the relationship of people to things. An attention to the physical world pervades these writers’ works, and they struggle to connect a rapidly changing human world to seemingly unchanging things. In the next chapter, I examine the work of Christopher Isherwood, a writer intensely conscious of the fallout from the First World War and the threat of a similar conflict. In the two novels that comprise *The Berlin Stories*, Isherwood’s persona is fixated on the garish, heavy, kitschy furnishings of Fraulein Schroeder’s lodging house. He imagines them occupying the museums of the future not because they are beautiful or authentic, but because they will simply (seemingly) last longer than anything or anyone else. His fascination with the things is

⁹ See also Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in which Gordon Comstock mentally berates both the “high-brow” readers of Eliot and Woolf and the “low-brow” readers of sentimental romances at the library where he works.

both comical and sad, allowing him both to mourn the likely loss of many of the people and things of Berlin and to detach himself from them, enjoying the absurdity of these odd furnishings and the other things he sees. Readers have long expressed discomfort with the detachment with which Isherwood presents violent events, including Nazi atrocities. In this chapter, I show how Isherwood engages with things as a means of exploring and problematizing the idea of political commitment, of “taking sides” in a city torn apart by divisions.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys also shows a divided city (Paris, not Berlin), contrasting the clashing national monuments of the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne with the seedy yet faithfully present bed and side table of Sasha Jensen’s room. In chapter three, I analyze Rhys’s use of fashion to explore the slippery divide between the person and the thing in her thirties works. Rhys frequently focuses on young women who work as *mannequins*, as fashion models were then known (a word that captures the tension between the person and the thing), as well as on women who long for dresses and hats that promise to bestow a new vitality on them. I show that for Rhys, the confusion between the person and the thing often coalesces with the question of distinguishing between the original and the knockoff. Drawing on Sigfried Kracauer’s essays about chorus girls as well as Caroline Evans’s analyses of the uncanny world of fashion modeling, I show that Rhys uses the problem of distinguishing between the person and the thing to articulate the fear that all people are merely reproductions rather than individuals. I also engage with her comparisons of other people to trees, flowers, and other entities seemingly in between the categories of the

person and the thing. These examples, I argue, reflect Rhys's use of the ultimate Other—the thing—to conceptualize shifting relationships among people in the interwar city.

In chapter four, I analyze the ambivalent humor of Evelyn Waugh's early novels, calling attention to his frequent oppositions between chaos and order. Though many critics focus primarily on finding order or a pattern in his jumbled and thingy novels, I suggest an approach that instead looks at the clutter or chaos of the works—at how Waugh “does things with things,” to borrow an expression from Bill Brown (“How”). In part, this clutter forms through the mobility of people and things from the Western world to “primitive” cultures and back again. Waugh's chaotic style casts doubt on any attempt to classify or organize the various things and people of the world and to separate the primitive from the modern, ultimately dooming even attempts to disentangle categories such as *persons* and *things* from one another. This treatment of people as things fosters a darkly comic tone in Waugh's work, as it alternately suggests that readers should sympathize with characters who die or suffer from violence and encourages them to laugh at the characters' fates.

Finally, I explore Elizabeth Bowen's approach to things, genre, and generations in my fifth chapter. Bowen's work has frequently been overlooked by critics because it is difficult to situate within one particular genre, although there has been a growing critical interest in her oeuvre. Her novels have elements associated with realism, modernism, and the gothic, and the conventions of each of these genres often entail representing objects in different ways. Rather than choosing one of these approaches, Bowen uses aspects of all of them, alternately representing objects as a means of establishing verisimilitude, as

symbols that offer insight into her characters' psyches, and as more alien and impenetrable things. This alternation between different ways of presenting things correlates to the younger generation's uncertain handling of objects in the novels. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who presided over households of Victoriana and positioned themselves "at the hub of things," these children and young adults are ambivalent to their inherited things, feeling that they will never truly own them. Still, they lean to the things as a source of stability amid signs that war will come soon. In her somewhat later wartime works, Bowen sustains this focus on the things that remain after conflict. She returns to the question of what this younger generation might do with the things they have inherited, suggesting they should approach them as toys and test out different ways of using and relating to them.

In concluding with Bowen's unmoored young people and their seemingly more centered antecedents, I emphasize the significance things had for a generation of writers who felt themselves to be in-between: between two wars, between modernism and what would come after it. While these four writers were not, at the time, closely associated with each other, the treatment of things in their works shares many traits. These writers are acutely aware both of the ways people seem thinglike and of the ways things, in their solidity, can seem to rebuke people for their mutability. They also consider things as a possible alternative to the competing political, religious, and philosophical ideologies they feel pressured to adopt. Many works of the decade leading up to the Second World War include speculations about what would remain in the wake of extreme violence, war, and disaster. Chairs, tables, and knickknacks—simple things, often ugly things, without

great monetary or aesthetic value—persist after the fall or death of the people who own them and the societies in which they function. They outlive the competing ideologies. Yet given the things' remoteness from human affairs, the idea that at least they would persist in an utterly changed world offers only ambiguous comfort.

CHAPTER TWO
KITSCHY THINGS AND SYNTHETIC BODIES
IN CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S *THE BERLIN STORIES*

What becomes of such things? How could they ever be destroyed?
—Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*

In taking stock of the literary and social climate in the thirties, many readers have considered Christopher Isherwood a necessary, if occasionally frustrating, guide. Isherwood's novels *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), later published in one volume as *The Berlin Stories*, became popular in Britain for their insights into Weimar Germany as the Nazis were coming to power. The novels not only provide accounts of the historical situation but also have been considered key texts of a thirties generation that drew on a modernist aesthetic while also valuing documentary-style realism and political action—the desire to “engage the actuality of history now” (Hopkins 78), as I mentioned in my introduction. Though each of *The Berlin Stories* is at least semifictional, both novels use documentary tropes and encourage readers to associate the characters with actual people. Both feature a narrator based on the author, who lived in Berlin from 1929 to 1933. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, the narrator is actually called Christopher Isherwood (and I will refer to this narrator as “Isherwood” or Christopher, to avoid confusion with Isherwood the author); in *Mr. Norris Changes*

Trains, the narrator is named William Bradshaw, after Isherwood's two middle names.

The novels present a panorama of social classes and milieux, of touristy bars, Communist meetings, and riots in the streets.

Despite Isherwood's cataloguing of the various classes, political parties, and gathering places of thirties Berlin, some readers, past and present, have found the works maddeningly evasive. Though the novels sometimes claim that "Isherwood" or Bradshaw is an objective observer—a camera lens, merely recording what happens around him—at other times they suggest that the account is fabricated, theatrical, or comedic. Both of these narratorial personae insist that they are not the focus of the story they are telling, but their very misdirections sometimes deflect attention from the events happening around them. Some readers complain that the claim to objectivity or camera-like clarity is naïve, and that Isherwood does not acknowledge his own biases; others find it inappropriate in a place and time in which ideological commitment was important to so many people, and in which the stakes were so high. Many have read the works in the light of his declaration of his pacifism and his subsequent departure from Europe to the United States one month after the publication of *Goodbye to Berlin*, a gesture that many regarded as a betrayal of a homeland in danger and on the brink of war.¹

In recent years, several critics have complicated this take on Isherwood's political commitment and his supposed objectivity. Jamie Carr has pointed out that while Isherwood disdained the Nazi ethos, he also found other possible affiliations, such as

¹ See Paul Piazza's *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth*, pp. 13–14, for a variety of these reactions to Isherwood's departure and newfound pacifism on the eve of World War II.

Communism and British nationalism, wanting. In large part, he attributed his distaste for all existing political parties to his homosexuality, which would be rejected by nearly any nation and party (27–34). As Carr suggests, Isherwood is highly conscious of the allure of political or national commitments, but finds nearly all of them problematic. Marsha Bryant and Dennis Denisoff examine how Isherwood uses campy humor to undercut claims to objectivity. Bryant ties Isherwood to a new documentary style that sought to reflect social conditions while revealing that the authoritative, unbiased, implicitly masculine documentarian stance was a “front.” Denisoff explores Isherwood’s use of camp humor to satirize conventions and encourage social inclusivity. Both Bryant and Denisoff suggest that Isherwood’s camp humor and theatricality are not flaws but rather central to his project, which captures both the reality of life in Berlin and the constant feeling of unreality about it.

Like Carr, Denisoff, and Bryant, I argue that Isherwood used irony and camp to represent the traumatic cultural transformations of thirties Berlin while questioning the ideological affiliations dividing that city and other parts of Europe. I also call attention to a subject that has not received enough consideration: Isherwood’s obsession with the exteriors of both people and things. His simultaneous attraction and aversion to political affiliations often leads him to focus on material things, which provide a haven from the intense ideological divisions and also promise to survive whatever conflict is to come, even if the people who own them do not. Isherwood’s personae view their association with a future world after war in ways both fatalistic and hopeful, as well as darkly humorous. His camp sensibility leads him to focus particularly on things that are kitschy,

ugly, heavy, and sham. Their unnatural, synthetic appearance often leads Isherwood to engage with them ironically, but they also lead him to serious questions about the future of Europe at a time in which every day feels like the “dress rehearsal of a disaster” or the “last night of an epoch” (*GB* 173). In a city filled with political arguments that lead to riots, the things do not communicate ideas. Isherwood focuses on the ways in which they exceed or frustrate symbolic meanings. Rather, they simply exist, and will continue to exist through whatever conflict is to come.

Like the kitschy things, Isherwood’s characters have ill-fitting and seemingly artificial exteriors. Many of their bodies are disproportionate or dysfunctional, broken or cobbled together from a mix of human and synthetic parts (toupees, monocles, artificial legs), making them similar to the inanimate things. He describes characters’ physical eccentricities rather than their interior states. This emphasis on the bodies or exteriors of his characters leads to situations that may induce laughter; however, most readers’ laughter is bound to be deeply uneasy, given that these comic situations arise amid grim historical developments. Unlike the kitschy knickknacks that captivate Isherwood’s narrators, the people of Berlin will not necessarily survive the coming war. His emphasis on the exterior of each person also encourages readers to think about the inaccessible interior—whether one thinks of this interior as a consciousness, a self, or a soul—somewhere underneath. Isherwood’s irony, detachment, and dark humor ultimately leads readers to consider the difference between persons and things, and to think about what will remain after a devastating war claims the lives of many.

Kitsch: “Unnecessarily Solid, Abnormally Heavy, and Dangerously Sharp”

As I explained in my introduction, thing theory focuses on those moments in which inanimate things are most insistently material, in which they cannot be thought of as symbols or objects defined by their function or significance in the human world. Michael Taussig writes, “Things are not symbols or star points for a multitude of poetic associations. Nor are they signs of anything much. Rather they are things, just things” (“Dying” 381). Both Douglas Mao and Bill Brown call attention to what Heidegger referred to as the “thingness of the thing,” or its recalcitrant materiality—while recognizing that any attempt to describe the materiality of the thing in language distorts this purely physical quality (Brown, “Thing” 6–7; Mao 46).

The alienness of the material world to human systems of significance divorces things from persons, yet this very sovereignty of the things gives them an uncanny air of containing life. As Bill Brown puts it, “Even when we wish to dispense with any talk about things, they may still be talking about us, sharing a secret life where they slowly conspire against us” (“How” 943). The uncanniness of things, Brown explains, comes from their “doubleness,” from the fact that they are both “things and signs of something else” (*Sense* 11). He distinguishes an *object* from a *thing* by explaining that while an object belongs to a recognizable human category and serves a particular function, calling a material entity a *thing* captures the item’s mysterious solidity, its resistance to human understanding (“Thing” 4). Though we might usually treat furniture or other possessions as objects, thinking of them only when we need them, they become things in those moments in which they become unfamiliar or in which they seem to refuse to bend to our

will. Human bodies themselves can become unfamiliar in this way, as Isherwood shows. They evade conscious control and can become broken, disproportionate, or a mix of human and synthetic parts.

Brown and Mao also explore how objects function in the human world, and how their use and significance changes over time. They posit that many modernist artists reacted against the rise of the reproduction in the early twentieth century, communicating a desire to protect the singular object. Mao focuses on the modernist fascination with the figure of the artisan, arguing that many modernist writers saw their own works as “solid objects” impervious to sundering—even though these works were, of course, printed in mass quantities and affected by the commercial world. Jon Erickson analyzes this same imperative in *The Fate of the Object in the Modern World*, arguing that modernist writers attempted to make their works “difficult” in order to safeguard them from a “too-easy reception”: “The primary form of resistance is the creation of an object that proclaims and draws attention to its objecthood, that is, that resists rationalized language’s tendency to reduce it to a sign to be consumed” (3). Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (2003), a study of the representation of things in American realist writing, begins with an exploration of the importance of things to modernist writers, in which Brown argues that the “modernist’s fetishized thing” is “saved from the humiliation of homogeneity; and it is saved from the tyranny of use, from the instrumental, utilitarian reason that has come to seem modernity’s greatest threat to mankind” (8).

In analyzing modernists’ reaction to the reproduction, Brown and Mao draw on Walter Benjamin’s famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical

Reproduction.” Benjamin argues that new technologies produced a change in people’s access to and ability to interact with objects. The development of photography and, especially, film made works of art available to a greater number of people, who could all view the works simultaneously. This availability of the art to people in different places weakened the concept of an “original” or authoritative version of a work of art. Though one could, previously, make a copy of a painting, the original version would remain the authentic work. Benjamin characterizes the presence of this type of “original” art object as an “aura,” the object’s unique presence in time and space, which is necessary for this concept of “authenticity” (222). Benjamin writes that the “authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (223). The aura gives the art object history but also makes it fragile. The reproduced or reproducible item, on the other hand, may have been generated at any time or place, and the imprints of time on the item are less legible and understandable.

Though Benjamin does not explicitly elevate either the auratic artwork or the reproduction, many others did feel nostalgia for the singular artifact and desired to safeguard its aura. As some critics have noted, the rise of the reproduction roughly coincides with the “Museum Age,” named for the number of museums that opened in Europe and North America in the early twentieth century.² Museums typically show

² See, for example, Stephen Conn’s *Museums and American Intellectual Life 1876–1926* and Tony Bennett’s “Speaking to the Eyes: Museums, Legibility and the Social Order” for more on the expansion and development of museums in the early twentieth century. As art historian Donald Preziosi suggests, the museum setting creates the impression that one can “commune” directly with a singular, authentic artifact (97).

things that are fragile and unique; they emphasize the importance of being in the presence of a singular, authentic object.

Yet if one response to the mechanical reproduction was to protect the auratic artwork, another response was to embrace the reproduction, as Isherwood does. In her essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag remarks, “Camp...makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object” (289). She writes that camp is a refined, often ironic response to synthetic or artificial art. Camp contains “a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy,” although camp can show rural scenes (279). Celeste Olalquiaga proposes that as society modernizes, the idea of “uniqueness” increasingly replaces that of authenticity. Uniqueness, she writes, is not “intrinsic to an object” but rather relates to a “feeling or perception” that “happens when objects are personalized in the privacy of someone’s specific universe” (16–17). With an emphasis on uniqueness rather than authenticity, it no longer *matters* whether an object is the only one of its kind; what matters is the special connection its owner feels he or she shares with the object.

Mao and Brown primarily engage with those interwar writers who reacted to the rise of the reproduction with nostalgia for the singular thing and the work of the craftsman. While many writers of the time were also interested in film and other examples of mechanical reproduction, few writers of the twenties or thirties (or any time, for that matter) have embraced the reproduction to the extent that Isherwood did. His most famous line remains one from the beginning of *Goodbye to Berlin*, which announces, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking”

(1). This identification with film and photography would persist throughout Isherwood's career. He compared his autobiography *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1938) to an "album of snapshots" (LS 297) and went on to write about working on films in the 1945 novella *Prater Violet*. Isherwood was also fixated on the synthetic, the inauthentic, and the sham. *Sham* is a word that recurs frequently throughout his oeuvre, as he describes both fearing and feeling attracted to the artificial. *Lions and Shadows* registers his anxiety from youth to adulthood about being "disgustingly sham" (81), seeming "every kind of prig, fool, and sham" (309), and having to "sham [his] way through life" (305). In *Goodbye to Berlin*, "Isherwood" asks himself, "Wasn't I a bit of a sham anyway...with my arty talk to lady pupils and my newly acquired parlour-socialism?" (65). His narratorial personae in *The Berlin Stories*, William Bradshaw and "Christopher Isherwood," might be considered sham versions of Isherwood himself.³ This attraction to the inauthentic accounts for a big part of Isherwood's love affair with Berlin, a city of "copies of copies" of architectural styles (GB 186).

Some of Isherwood's most memorable comic creations have thoroughly invented themselves and yet touchingly "half-believe" the stories they have fabricated of their past histories (GB 35). In *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, the aesthete Arthur Norris not only carefully constructs his appearance each morning through the use of cosmetics, a wig, and an eyebrow thinner, but also regularly deceives himself about his own motives as he sells international secrets for money. William Bradshaw notes that Norris's lies about himself are "outrageous, grotesque, entirely without shame" but that "had he demanded

³ The various names others give to the narrators, including "Chris," "Christoph," "Herr Issyvoo," "Bill," and "Willi," also fragment the narrators' identities.

it, I'd have sworn that two and two make five" (*MNCT* 178). In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Sally Bowles—Isherwood's most famous character—is both an enticing, sexually daring cabaret singer and the “daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Bowles” of Lancashire (33). Theatrical metaphors abound in Isherwood's writing, as he refers to the “pantomime” of English tea-time (*PV* 8), the “sham” “schoolmaster voice” his narrating persona adopts with pupils (*GB* 65, 15), and the Baron von Pregnitz's laugh, which is a “curiosity, an heirloom...scarcely to be heard nowadays except on the legitimate stage” (*MNCT* 107).

Isherwood's obsession with artifice leads him to embrace kitsch and camp. The words *kitsch* and *camp* are sometimes used interchangeably, but I will use them to capture an important distinction: *camp* refers to a consciously artificial and humorous style, persona, or performance, while *kitsch* refers to objects seen as trashy, artificial, or in bad taste. As Scott Long suggests, “Camp is essentially an *attitude toward* kitsch” (86). Both concepts were new at the time of Isherwood's writing, and he was one of the first writers to describe and embrace the camp style. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of *kitsch* in English in 1926 (of course, it was used in German long before then), and the first use of *camp* in the sense of celebrating artificiality in 1931. In a 1939 *Partisan Review* article, Clement Greenberg excoriated kitsch as entirely artificial, calling it “ersatz culture...destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide...Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” (12). Isherwood similarly associated kitsch with the spurious or artificial, but his affection for the sham and

spurious brought about a different and more positive (although still conflicted) reaction. Isherwood's contemporary Anthony Powell, later reflecting on the word *kitsch*, associated it with Isherwood and his milieu: "My own impressions of first hearing the term suggest that what most people then stigmatised as 'chi-chi' was called 'kitsch' by those few familiar with Isherwood's Berlin." Powell went on to identify kitsch with a "flat in which there seemed too many domes of Victorian wax-fruit, or pictures constructed out of beads and matchboxes" (*Some Poets* 316).

A section of Isherwood's 1954 novel *The World in the Evening* offers one of the first descriptions of camp style, ten years before Susan Sontag's more exhaustive and canonical essay "Notes on Camp." (In that essay, Sontag dismissed Isherwood's characterization of camp as a "lazy two-page sketch" [275].) In his book, Isherwood distinguished "High Camp" from "Low Camp": Low Camp is

a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich... High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance. (125)

While Isherwood introduces a distinction between types of camp, both types thrive on artifice and parody. All of Isherwood's works show this fascination with parody and, especially, the artificial. Most, also, adopt varying tones and registers, swinging rapidly from the detached to the wryly melodramatic to the tragic and back again. They capture his association of "High Camp" with both fun and seriousness.

Critical reactions to Isherwood's camp style differ. Linda Mizejewski writes that camp style in general (including Isherwood's use of it) is misogynistic, involving "the

representation of specifically *female* sexuality as grotesque or monstrous—the overwhelming mother, the garish whore, the carnivalesque hag” (42). For Mizejewski, people with camp sensibilities elevate themselves above the objects of their ridicule, critiquing others’ artificiality while calling attention to their own supposed authenticity. Conversely, Dennis Denisoff interprets the “campiness” of Isherwood’s aesthetic positively, arguing that it performs the function of “cultural revision,” destabilizing social and sexual mores to encourage a sense of inclusiveness (92). Denisoff’s interpretation celebrates the “fun and artifice and elegance” shown by Sally Bowles and Arthur Norris (among others).

This divide among Isherwood critics captures a tension at the heart of camp style, which can be used both to dismantle aesthetic and social divisions and to reinforce them. Despite his celebration of the camp aesthetic in *The Berlin Stories*, Denisoff questions Isherwood’s division of camp into “high” and “low” categories, arguing that “an aspect of much camp is its satirizing of ‘serious,’ or ‘high,’ artistic concerns through seemingly low-brow methods” (85). Most camp, he claims, encourages sympathy and broad-mindedness. Yet Isherwood is not alone in his use of camp style to create or explore aesthetic divisions. In her essay on camp, Susan Sontag compares the “connoisseur of camp” to its progenitor, the turn-of-the-century dandy. Sontag writes that the dandy “sought rare sensations, undefiled by mass appreciation,” while the “connoisseur of camp” finds pleasure “not in Latin poetry and rare wines and velvet jackets, but in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses.” Though the camp connoisseur finds pleasure in common things, he or she appreciates them in a different way than the

masses do, because this connoisseur “learns to possess them in a rare way” (289). Others echo this idea that the camp connoisseur finds rarefied ways to enjoy common objects or art forms. John Waters, the filmmaker perhaps most associated with camp, captures the elitism of “bad taste”: “Taste is style and to know bad taste of course you have to have been taught the rules of the tyranny of good taste so you can yearn to break them” (Chapman). While Waters’s reference to the “tyranny of taste” suggests that camp can foster a more inclusive approach to art, he also insinuates that a lover of camp must acquire the superior discernment to appreciate it.

Isherwood wrestled with issues of bad and good taste, and with the division between high and low culture. As a well-educated British man who spent time in German slums, he was highly conscious of signs of snobbery, and reverse snobbery, in himself and his friends. He had, he later wrote, initially gone to Berlin because he was “suffering from an inhibition, then not unusual among upper-class homosexuals; he couldn’t relax sexually with a member of his own class or nation. He needed a working-class foreigner” whom he could meet at one of Berlin’s famous “boy bars” (*CK* 3). Isherwood constantly examines himself for evidence both of the aesthetic and social prejudice that stems from being a member of an educated upper class and of the reverse snobbery that comes from mindlessly exalting the working class. In his literary criticism and autobiographical writing, he also linked an ambivalence toward both high culture and low culture to his generation of young writers in the thirties. While Isherwood considered Virginia Woolf one of his main influences, for example, he criticized her for being (as he saw it) too disengaged from political reality and denigrated certain literary and intellectual

pretensions for being “too Hogarth Pressy”—drawing on the associations of the Woolfs and Bloomsbury with elitism (*CK* 160). Isherwood’s affection for kitschy things and adoption of a camp style reflects his ambivalence about both high culture and low culture.

Isherwood’s camp style leads him to embrace many contradictions, involving not only class affiliation but rapidly varying tones and registers. Olalquiaga suggests that kitsch items have a sense of mystery that encourages people to view them in a spirit of both pathos and humor. While the auratic object is likely to be associated with the time and place of its original use, the reproducible item is more difficult to place. It does not have an aura but the “debris of an aura” (146). The artificiality of the things can make them comic, but the utter mystery of their production may foster a sense of disconnection and loss. This opacity is what attracts Isherwood to the fake—to both the fake object and the fake persona.

Isherwood announces his interest in kitschy, heavy, and artificial things from the very first page of *Goodbye to Berlin*. The book begins not with the famous statement “I am a camera,” but rather with a description of the tawdry buildings and other things all around Berlin:

From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied façades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scrollwork and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class. (1)

The comparison of the houses to safes suggests that they are notable more for the “tarnished valuables” they contain than for the people living inside them—people who

must live uneasily with the objects and furniture “crammed” inside. Indeed, we later learn of one Berlin household with so much furniture “that you had to squeeze your way into it sideways” (101). Isherwood continues, throughout the book, to tell of the immense importance of furnishings to the Berliners he meets. Despite their losses in the recent depression and the need of many people to move to smaller homes, they are unwilling to part with material possessions, no matter how shabby or burdensome they are. Many of the denizens of Berlin have impossibly cluttered flats because the contemporary conditions have forced them to move into smaller places or to take on lodgers, but they are unwilling to part with their material effects.

As the initial section proceeds, Isherwood continues to be fixated on things, but turns from the tarnished safes outside to the things in the lodging house in which he is staying. He describes hearing young men in the street whistle for their “girls” with calls that are “lascivious and private and sad.” Since he is “in a foreign city, far from home,” he longs to respond to some of these “insistently human” cries, but contents himself with watching and listening from his rented room. There, he shares company with the possessions of his landlady, Frä. Schroeder:

Here, at the writing table, I am confronted by a phalanx of metal objects—a pair of candlesticks shaped like entwined serpents, an ashtray from which emerges the head of a crocodile, a paper-knife copied from a Florentine dagger, a brass dolphin holding on the end of its tail a broken clock. What becomes of these things? How could they ever be destroyed? They will probably remain intact for thousands of years: people will treasure them in museums. Or perhaps they will merely be melted down for munitions in a war. (2)

Like the material contents of the “solemn” street outside, the things seem animate, “confronting” and challenging him. They remind him of weapons and threatening

animals: serpents, crocodiles, daggers, munitions. In Frl. Schroeder's collection, everything is "unnecessarily solid, abnormally heavy and dangerously sharp," even things not normally dangerous. The hatstand, for example is made from "sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?)" that are "heavy and sharp enough to kill." The menacing quality of the things seems to come from their otherness, their resistance to interpretation. Solid, metal, and impenetrable, the items make "Isherwood" think that they cannot be destroyed because they seem so enigmatic. The endurance of the things, in their "unvarying positions," contrasts with the transience of the people in the city. The things' stability and seeming indestructibility leads him to view them as a source of both solace and menace. While violent words and images saturate the description, the narrator also marvels at the items' very existence. Their alien quality grants them a sovereignty from human affairs, but this alien quality also makes them forbidding.

In part, this alien quality comes from their tastelessness. Isherwood wonders what becomes of these things because they have no apparent reason for existing. Who makes them? Who would possibly buy them? While each of them is part of a clear category of objects—ashtrays, hatstands, clocks—used to suit a human need or purpose, the over-ornateness of the things distracts from that function, making them insistently material. The items are ugly, heavy, impractical, and sham, drawing on styles from a variety of time periods and copying the form of animals while looking anything but natural. For Isherwood, Frl. Schroeder's kitschy things are both pathetic and humorous. They remind him of the potential future destruction to come to Berlin and, perhaps, the rest of Europe,

but their ridiculous appearance detracts from this pathos. Their strangeness simultaneously compels him and allows him to view them with ironic detachment.

The idea that people would “treasure” the collection in museums, flippant though it may be, reverses the traditional museum aesthetic. Most museum objects are unique and fragile, prized either for their beauty or their insights into a particular culture. They have the function of educating. The collection, with its aggressive ugliness, will inspire admiration (“Isherwood” thinks) solely due to its capacity to withstand the ravages of time. While “Isherwood’s” intimation of a coming war, in his reference to Frl. Schroeder’s possessions potentially being melted down for munitions, obviously proves true, his intuition that the things will survive the conflict is also correct. Both in a 1954 preface to *The Berlin Stories* and in his 1976 memoir, Isherwood recounts his journey back to Berlin after the end of the Second World War, in which he visited Frl. Meta Thureau—the woman who provided the basis for the Frl. Schroeder character—who gave him the brass dolphin clock, which had survived a bombing with only a small scratch: “I like to think that it will survive me, and anything that may be dropped on this neighborhood, in the near or distant future” (*Berlin* xi–xii). Isherwood was still referring fondly to the clock, which he continued to display on his desk, in a 1968 diary entry (*The Sixties* 530).

While Isherwood’s later accounts highlight the comfort that the clock provides, in *Goodbye to Berlin* Frl. Schroeder’s possessions also induce a “curious trance-like state of depression” in the narrator, as he compares the things’ propensity for survival with his own inevitable demise. “Isherwood” discusses the “various marks and stains” left by

prior lodgers in his room: recalcitrant traces of vomit from a birthday party, ink-stains from a frazzled professor, coffee stains from where a man would become, in Frl. Schroeder's words, "excited about his feelings" when sitting with his fiancée in the mornings (4–5). As the novel continues, Christopher lives for a time in a slummy lodging house and marks a circle on a piece of furniture before he leaves. Like the marks and traces on Frl. Schroeder's things, it is a physical trace that will outlast Christopher's presence in Berlin and perhaps his life.

Isherwood's repeated references to these and other "marks" show the pathos of the object world: material things bear witness to human actions and are invested with significance by their possessors, but these meanings are lost in time. The things that remain after death, war, and other changes can suggest that they once had some kind of meaning for some person, but the precise nature of that meaning is hauntingly lost. As Christopher muses about the lodgers' traces in Frl. Schroeder's home, "Where are all those lodgers now? Where, in another ten years, shall I be, myself? Certainly not here...How much food must I gradually, wearily consume on my way? How many shoes shall I wear out? How many thousands of cigarettes shall I smoke?...What an awful tasteless prospect! And yet, to have to die..." The repulsiveness of the thought has a visceral effect on Christopher, who feels a sudden "pang of apprehension" that requires him to "go to the lavatory" (6). The things that fascinate Isherwood are not vestiges of a past time, but they already contain reminders of the future destruction of the world around him, thus allowing him to view them with both sadness and irony. Their kitschy artificiality reinforces this conflicted reaction, allowing Isherwood to represent them in a

spirit of both pathos and detachment. His musings about war and death attain a certain gravitas in a book about Nazis and violence, but the references to vomit and defecation (along with the general incongruity of some of the things) undercut that seriousness and pathos.

In recent years, several thing theorists have investigated the relationship of things and war—in particular, the First World War—in literature. Brown, in an article about Virginia Woolf's story "Solid Objects," suggests that the experience with scarcity and privation brought on by the First World War transformed people's perceptions of material things. In the story, a man named John becomes captivated by a series of small, apparently useless things, ultimately relinquishing his political career to devote himself wholly to his collection. The items John collects are not functional or even, often, identifiable; mere fragments of glass and other materials, they initially serve as paperweights, but their "duty" is "more and more of an ornamental nature, since papers needing a weight to hold them down proved scarcer and scarcer" (Woolf, "Solid" 85). In his reading, Brown suggests that wartime experiences of scarcity provided the "recognition that the materials of everyday objects could have another life" ("Secret" 2). Woolf frequently draws attention to the things that outlast their possessors, who die or are dispersed by war and other changes. *Jacob's Room* ends with a reference to Jacob's shoes, which remain after his implied death during World War I. The "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* details the changes to (but ultimate endurance of) the Ramsays' summer home in the Hebrides as several human characters disappear, their actions and even deaths relegated to brackets.

In *Postcards from the Trenches* (1996), Allyson Booth also uses Woolf and other modernists as she grapples with issues of things and memory in the wake of the First World War. She argues that the war produced a shift in people's conceptions of the object world. Booth suggests that for modernist writers and architects, objects are "forgetful," "designed to display either the erasure of history or the possibility of pitching it into the garbage." Booth indicates that for many modernist writer, objects condense and congeal past memories—specifically, memories of war and violence, or memories that remind characters of the changes in their lives brought on by war—and that these characters often "discard" these objects in order to dispose of the past (127). Yet in Isherwood's case, the things make him think not of a past war but of a war yet to come. In their remoteness from the human world, they are strangely comforting, promising to outlast any future conflict. This focus on things that will remain after a war that hasn't happened yet produces a conflicted response. He uses the things to mourn what is not yet lost, but also feels detached from them. As I'll discuss in subsequent chapters, Evelyn Waugh and Elizabeth Bowen also frequently reflect on the things that will remain after war. The writers are often saddened by the coming war, comforted by the persistence of the things, and challenged by the things' aloofness and alien quality. Though the things promise that something familiar will still be there in the future, the things will lose the meaning they had for their possessors. The people who find them will attach new meanings to them—or dispose of them altogether.

This complicated response to the likely persistence of things after people have perished explains in part why Isherwood concentrates specifically on kitschy or tasteless

items. In representing things that seem alien from people, recalcitrant and insistently material, he and the other writers in this study resist the urge to see things as symbols of their owners. In many cases, they criticize the increasing popularity of using objects to construct or exhibit a personality.⁴ They were not alone in skewering this practice. In their 1940 “social history” of Britain, *The Long Week-End*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge note that while designers were charged with giving “what was called ‘individuality’ or ‘personality’” to a house or flat, they eventually created spaces that were “all precisely alike in their difference from the ordinary” (162). While Graves and Hodge obviously exaggerate the degree of conformity established by interior decoration, their critique reflects both the commonality of the practice of using household items to communicate a person’s distinctive personality and the frequent skepticism that these objects could really capture a person’s inner self—or that each person’s inner self was really all that distinctive. Similarly, Henry Green’s *Party Going* (1939) describes the identical homes of the rich, noting that “even what few books there were bore the same titles and these were dummies....[The owners’] two minds, their hearts even must beat as one when their books, even if they were only bindings, bore identical titles” (80).⁵

The Berlin Stories further this skepticism of tasteful decoration, lightly mocking many of those who take great pains to make their living spaces distinctive. Many

⁴ Deborah Cohen, in *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (2006), shows that in turn-of-the-century England the “interior” of a home came to be associated with a person’s “inner” life, as reproductions of objects and furniture facilitated the construction, expression, and exhibition of a person’s distinctive personality (135). The business of interior design, developed and popularized in the 1910s and 1920s, facilitated the use of the interior of the home to “express” the interior of the home’s owner.

⁵ The indeterminate syntax is in the original (and continues throughout Green’s novel).

characters use material things to establish and exhibit their “personalities,” often with mixed results. Natalia Landauer, a laughably pretentious yet endearing young Jewish woman, attempts to win “Isherwood’s” favor by showing him “gramophone records, pictures, books” and other accoutrements of culture immediately upon his entrance into her family’s home (140). Though these possessions are meant to showcase her cultured sensibility, Isherwood is not interested in them. Instead, he enjoys those things that seem to have a life of their own, resisting Natalia’s desire to use her home and things to show her intelligence and culture. He does like the decorations Natalia made for a long-ago party, which her mother has not allowed her to take down. Her paper-cutouts of “maidens” and animals in the family living room make a “comically ineffectual protest against the bourgeois solidity of the mahogany furniture” (141). None of Natalia’s things have the same compelling charm as Frl. Schroeder’s things, with their kitschy tastelessness. Frl. Schroeder’s “stuffy-smelling pots of ferns,” “numerous little crochet mats,” and “metal figures of dogs” compel a sense of awe at their very existence (*MNCT* 90).

Readers may view Isherwood’s representation of kitschy things as problematic, since it reminds us that he is of a higher class than many of the people around him. Though his belief that Frl. Schroeder’s metal knickknacks are hardier and less aesthetically pleasing than more modern items may indicate elitism, simply dismissing Isherwood as a snob would prevent us from recognizing his complex and conflicted representation of material things. For Isherwood, kitschy objects seem more “thingy,” more insistently material, than “tasteful” items. In *Christopher and His Kind*, he recounts

a visit to friends Chris and Gerald, who share a flat with unobtrusive décor. He refers to the place as the “last thing in tasteful modernity—they have a cat which tones in perfectly with the furnishings.” Its elegance prompts Chris to “behav[e] as though he were staying in a hotel suite” (103). Frl. Schroeder’s strange things could not “tone in perfectly” anywhere, nor could they achieve the bland tastefulness of an elegant hotel. They compel attention to their material presence.

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, “Isherwood” has a kind of double, a man who has also been educated in good taste but appreciates the absurdity of kitsch. Bernhard Landauer is Natalia’s cousin and the head of Landauers’ Department Store. Like “Isherwood,” Bernhard is in a sense an exile, having toured the East extensively and considering it a kind of spiritual home. He is an observer who has been “right round the world—gently inquisitive, mildly satiric, poking his delicate beak-like nose into everything” (155). “Isherwood’s” detachment finds its mirror in Bernhard. Natalia introduces Bernhard as someone “vairy sarcastical” whose opinions are difficult to decode (154). He sets aside his ingrained aloofness and confides in the narrator, calling his disclosures an “experiment” and referring to himself as an “unnecessarily complicated piece of mechanism” (172).

Bernhard shares not only the narrator’s evasiveness and irony but also his investment of an uneasy faith in things in times of turmoil. In one particularly intimate moment, Bernhard says that he used to “pretend to myself that I was the last human being left alive in the world” during the Great War, in which neighbors and friends persecuted his family because of his English mother, and his elder brother died in combat (169). He

describes standing in his cottage, looking at the things in his collection and the lake outside, believing that the war would “go on for ten, or fifteen, or even twenty years.” Like “Isherwood,” he sees things as a source of solace, thinking of them as something that might survive war and drastic cultural change. Meditating on the lake and the cottage, Bernhard is able both to experience and detach himself from the loss associated with war and change. He hides himself behind his arsenal of material possessions. The outer door to his home is, Christopher notes, “so heavy that I had to push it open with both hands; it closed behind me with a hollow boom, like the firing of a cannon” and is yet only one of “four doors to protect Bernhard from the outer world” (154).

An avid collector, Bernhard shows Isherwood an assortment of his finds from jaunts to China and elsewhere: a “twelfth-century sandstone head of Buddha,” “little Greek and Siamese and Indo-Chinese statuettes and stone heads,” books such as Vachell’s *The Hill* and Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (154–55). Like “Isherwood,” however, Bernhard is a man of elegant tastes who finds kitschy things comforting. Trained as a sculptor, he instead works at the family department store, where he is both bemused and comforted by the items he sells. He shows Christopher “through departments of underwear, outfitting, electrical appliances, sport and cutlery to the private world behind the scenes,” a world of reproductions (156). Christopher laughingly patronizes the store, making small purchases: on one occasion, a pair of socks; on another, a nutmeg grater. Bernhard regularly jokes about the store, noting that “philanthropy is here combined with advertisement”—as the store offers free child care services but surrounds the children’s room with “cheap and attractive hats” to tempt their

mothers when they pick them up (157). Elsewhere, he comments acidly on the “sordid materialism” of the store and comments after an election, with mock relief, that “once again, Capitalism is saved” (177, 180). At night he panics, wondering “whether our firm, that great building packed from floor to roof with all our accumulations of property...really exists at all, except in [his] imagination” (180). Bernhard is both the most fatalistic and the least direct of Isherwood’s characters, and Christopher (like the reader) cannot tell whether Bernhard is sincere. However, his comments tie into a pattern, in the novel, of finding comfort in things rather than ideas. Bernhard shows an avid interest in the latest news about elections and riots, but himself professes no allegiance to a party. Asked if he was ever a communist, Bernhard acidly professes himself “constitutionally incapable of bringing [himself] to the required pitch of enthusiasm” (159). Instead, he surrounds himself with “accumulations of property” both at home and at the department store—not to flaunt his wealth or business acumen, but to envelop himself with things that seem permanent, lasting.

“Bizarre Remnants of Statuary”: Things and Politics

As I will argue, Isherwood presented things—and, particularly, kitschy things—as alternatives to political and religious ideologies and affiliations. However, he was also highly conscious of how ideas and language affect perceptions of the material world. Describing his time in Germany in his later memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood writes of the conversations he would have with the German pupils he tutored in English, emphasizing the ways in which human discourse and cultural differences alter conceptions of the material world:

What you must say to yourself is: Over there in England, they have a thing called a table. We may go to England and look at it and say, “That’s our *Tisch*.” But it isn’t... The two things are essentially different, because they’ve been thought about differently by two nations with different cultures. If you can grasp the fact that that thing in England isn’t merely *called* a table, it really *is* a table, then you’ll begin to grasp what the English themselves are like. (CK 20–21)

Despite this focus on the distance between language and the objects it names and describes, Isherwood often attempts to get at the thing underneath the labels “table” and “*Tisch*.” He is attentive to the tension between the concept of a table—the table as object—and the table itself—the table as thing.

In celebrating the overly ornate, heavy, and material things of Frl. Schroeder, Isherwood presents them not only as an alternative to more refined, fragile art objects but also as an alternative to politics and other sources of significance. He comments that her tall stove looks “like an altar”; the ornate chair “would do for a bishop’s throne.” He elevates the empirical world above the rhetoric of religion, with its focus on the afterlife and the invisible world. Though it is a religious commonplace that the soul outlives a person’s body and material gains, Isherwood focuses on how these strange things will last for thousands of years in museums, outlasting nearly everything around them. The way “Isherwood” marvels at things for their continuing existence alone is reminiscent of Franz Roh’s 1925 essay “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism,” an introduction to what were often called the New Objectivist or Post-Expressionist paintings of George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Georg Schrimpf. Roh details the shift from an Expressionist aesthetic of expansive canvases and religious symbolism to a smaller-scale aesthetic of familiar things presented in unfamiliar ways. Praising the “palpable exteriority” of the objects in the paintings, he writes that this approach leads artists to show the miracle of material

reality: “Post-Expressionism faithfully raises a pane of glass in front of a light, and is surprised that it doesn’t ‘melt,’ that it doesn’t inevitably transform itself, that it is accorded a brief stay in eternity” (18, 22). Isherwood similarly presents tables and chairs as miraculous in their presence alone, a better source of solace than any religious belief.

Some of the items in Frl. Schroeder’s home represent political personages: in the stained glass “cathedral windows” of a cupboard, “Bismarck faces the King of Prussia in stained glass” (2). But the symbolism of the images is mitigated by the grotesque furnishings that surround them. The things may relate to symbols and ideas, but they are *things* first and foremost. Isherwood calls attention primarily to their materiality. The pictures of Bismarck and the King of Prussia, made absurd by their proximity to the ashtray with a crocodile head and the serpent candlesticks, are one example of a familiar gesture on Isherwood’s part: putting political icons or symbols into new material contexts that emphasize their physicality and detract from their symbolic meaning. William Bradshaw describes being at a New Year’s Eve party, staring at a bust of Bismarck, with Arthur’s wig “perched rakishly on Bismarck’s helmet. It was much too big for him.” “Rather a graceful tribute, don’t you think, to the Iron Chancellor?” asks Norris, his use of the “Iron Chancellor” sobriquet calling attention to the statue’s transformation of a person into a thing (*MNCT* 26–27). Putting the wig on the representation of Bismarck calls our attention to the physical material of the statue (and to the physical body of Bismarck himself) rather than to whatever symbolic or political value might be attributed to that statue or to that body. The Bismarck episode is only one example among many of Isherwood’s humorous representations of portraits and sculptures. Sally Bowles’s

apartment features a “faded picture of an eighteenth-century battle, with the wounded reclining on their elbows in graceful attitudes, admiring the prancings of Frederick the Great’s horse” (*GB* 26).

This focus on the material of statues and other political icons as a way of detracting from their usual symbolic significance is common in thirties novels and I will return to it in later chapters. Another example comes from Anthony Powell’s *Venusberg* (1932), set in a nameless country on the Baltic going through many changes in regime. Two lovers find the fragments of an unidentified statue, dismantled during a change of political power in the nameless country on the Baltic in which the novel is set. The woman hooks her foot beneath the statue’s ear and rocks the head back and forth; the disconcerting rolling of the statue head distances the reader from their talk of love and of recent political developments. The scene registers the violence done to political monuments during regime changes, as a new regime regularly topples or destroys the monuments of a fallen one. Yet while the group responsible for the destruction of the statue apparently found it dangerous or maddening enough to be destroyed, the lovers (and the novel itself) disregard the symbolic meaning of the statue entirely, focusing only on the material.

The tendency of things—and, in particular, kitschy things—to devalue the political ideas they were meant to symbolize was acknowledged, and feared, by the Nazis, who wanted swastikas and other examples of Nazi iconography to retain their symbolic power. In addition to burning books, they burned home decorations dubbed “needless, tasteless, and nonsensical” (qtd. in Betts 32). A 1933 exhibition in Cologne

called “Away with National Kitsch” showed two rooms—one crammed with figurines, portraits, and national memorabilia, and the other simple, streamlined, and “modern.” Exhibition materials made clear that the second room was more desirable (Castillo 98). The Protection of National Symbols law, enacted the same year, detailed a list of kitsch objects that could not be defaced with the Nazi symbol—including “swastika-decorated sweaters, suspenders, and postcards” (Betts 34). The fear was that the power of the swastika would be diluted; tasteless things would call attention to themselves rather than to the political affiliation they were meant to represent and celebrate. Isherwood promotes this very dilution of political symbolism through the use of symbols in material places.

Isherwood’s focus on the physical material of the statues and paintings anticipates what would inevitably happen to the things in time: their initial meanings would become lost or be transformed. The fallout from the Second World War accelerated this transformation. In his later Preface to the *Berlin Stories*, Isherwood describes returning to the city in 1951 to find an “avenue of shattered monuments”—“bizarre remnants of statuary” such as a “uniformed general” and a “naked nymph on a horse,” now unrecognizable and taken out of their initial context (ix). The material of the monuments had outlived their political significance, as Isherwood anticipates in the novels. They were simply materials, given a certain amount of pathos due to their meanings lost in time.

The Berlin that the novels describe is awash in statues, paintings, posters, and flags professing adulation for a political figure or loyalty to a particular party. The party

and regional flags Berliners attach to their beach chairs make the vacation spot of Reugen Island resemble a “medieval camp” (*GB* 85), and the posters depicting the “venerable icon” of Hindenburg prior to the 1932 election strike a “frankly religious note” (*MNCT* 87). By focusing on the material qualities or physical contexts of political icons rather than their symbolic meanings, the novels attempt to evade the pressure to affiliate oneself with a political party or an ideology.

Though Berlin may have been especially divided, the same was increasingly true of Britain. Peter McDonald, in his article “Believing in the Thirties,” describes the seeming necessity of taking sides in that decade, explaining that writers “possessed...an embarrassment of beliefs of one kind or another,” yet the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War created a sense of “general failure” about the beliefs in question (74). Isherwood published *Goodbye to Berlin* in 1939, the year in which he and W. H. Auden vowed to each other that they would sever their ties to the Communist Party, with Isherwood confessing that they “had been playing parts, repeating slogans created for them by others” (*CK* 333). Isherwood eschewed some of the public advocacy advanced by other writers and did not add his name to a public letter, signed by his friends Auden and Stephen Spender as well as numerous others, supporting the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War (Cunningham 50–1). For this, and for his departure to the United States in 1939, many saw him as a traitor. Evelyn Waugh satirized Auden and Isherwood as the cowardly Parsnip and Pimpernel in his 1941 novel *Put Out More Flags*. One character says of the pair, “What I don’t see is how these two can claim to be contemporary if they run away from the biggest event in

contemporary history. They were contemporary enough about Spain when no one threatened to come and bomb them” (44).

In Isherwood’s time, some bemoaned his insistence on putting politics and history at the forefront of his novels; others took him to task for not taking a side. The tension between the desire to take a stand on political issues and the suspicion that such political stances were fruitless has often been considered a key characteristic of Isherwood’s generation. In her 1940 essay “The Leaning Tower,” Woolf named Isherwood as one of a group of insecure and egotistical writers between 1925 and 1939 whose works were “full of discord and bitterness, full of confusion and compromise” due to their desire to disavow their affiliation with their own class but inability to do so (142).⁶ Isherwood would not have denied this association of his generation with discord, bitterness, and confusion, but to a certain extent his novels embrace being “betwixt and between” different ideologies, or between politics and art.⁷

⁶ Woolf’s critiques of Isherwood and his coevals have been echoed by more recent critics as well. Janet Montefiore, for example, has suggested that the memoirs of Isherwood and other writers of the 1930s share a “mixture of anger at their teachers’ false values or brutality, pity for their victims, and irony at the youthful self’s gullibility, snobbery or cowardice” (48). Montefiore critiques Isherwood’s authorial stance in particular, showing that “Isherwood treats his younger self with an ironic detachment that looks deceptively like objectivity” (28). This detachment, she claims, allows Isherwood to simultaneously affirm and disavow a connection with his snobbish younger self.

⁷ An admirer of Woolf’s writing, he went so far as to comment, in a later preface to his first novel *All the Conspirators*, that the book seemed overly derivative of Woolf’s novels, though in a way that showed the touching enthusiasm of a young writer who had not yet found his own voice. A glowing obituary that Isherwood wrote just after Woolf’s death shows a keen knowledge of and appreciation for *To the Lighthouse* in particular, envisioning Woolf welcoming her readers into the drawing room and saying, “We were just talking about Charles Tansley—poor Charles, such a prig” (qtd. in Rosenbaum 412).

While Isherwood's eventual avowal of pacifism came after the writing of *The Berlin Stories*, the two novels express uneasiness with warring political allegiances even as they are saturated with political references. In *Mr. Norris*, William Bradshaw becomes a member of the Communist Party only after the dazzling Norris professes his (ultimately cynical and sham) affiliation with the party; "Isherwood" in *Goodbye to Berlin* records passing references to his onetime membership in the Communist Party in conversation, but does not specify the nature of his connection with the party (or say whether he still considers himself a Communist). Isherwood sends up the contemporary desire to grab hold of a belief—any belief—in a scene in *Mr. Norris* in which a crowd of Communists, giddy from their gains in the elections, begin chanting Arthur's name in all manner of political slogans, yelling "We want Arthur!" and "Arthur forever!" (*MNCT* 112).

Isherwood later explained that the reference to changing trains in the title of the book referred not only to Arthur Norris's movement from country to country, selling secrets and attempting to evade punishment, but also to the way he "keeps changing allies and political affiliations, jumping from one bandwagon onto another" (*CK* 188–189). In a moment of disillusion, "Isherwood" suspects that "these people could be made to believe in anybody or anything" (*GB* 190). He adopts the vocabulary of belief to describe many kinds of feelings and relationships, such as Sally Bowles's devotion to the millionaire Clive, describing her professed love for him as "a dogma in a newly adopted religious creed" (*GB* 47). However, he also critically comments on his own separation from Berlin political and social life, as he and Sally uninterestedly notice the funeral procession of

Yet Isherwood also noted that he and his friends would denigrate Woolf, whom they saw as elitist and overly committed to preserving aesthetics as a separate sphere from politics.

Hermann Müller, the chancellor of Germany from 1928–1930, from a hotel room window: “We had nothing to do with those Germans down there, marching, or with the dead man in the coffin, or with the words on the banners.” He wonders if he feels how people feel when they have “sold their souls to the Devil,” due to his apathy toward politics (49). In the later *Down There on a Visit* (1959), another work in which he discusses some of his time in Germany, Isherwood describes “losing” his “political faith” (161) and having to admit to himself, upon his departure from Germany in 1933, that he had “never been seriously involved” in Berlin politics, “never been a real partisan; only an excited spectator” (69).

For many readers, Isherwood’s distaste for these competing ideologies is problematic. They find his failure to take a stronger stance against Nazism troubling. They describe their discomfort with Isherwood’s detached accounts of Nazi violence, suggesting that the *Berlin Stories* do not come out as strongly against fascism as they could. Even supportive readers have suggested that Isherwood’s distance, detachment, and reluctance to take a clear political stance on the situation in Germany has led Isherwood to be relegated to the ranks of “minor” writers.⁸ These readers sometimes misunderstand the nuance of Isherwood’s position. Isherwood wanted to present fascism

⁸ As Anthony Shuttleworth notes, this sense of detachment has frequently led readers to dismiss *The Berlin Stories*; Isherwood still occasions a “certain uneasiness” among many critics (150). In his introduction to Gerald Hamilton’s memoir *Mr. Norris and I*, Isherwood himself writes that *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* “repels me now” because it is a “heartless fairy story about a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and near-starvation” (*Exhumations* 86). See also Jamie M. Carr’s *Queer Times: Christopher Isherwood’s Modernity*, pp. 27–52, and Stephen da Silva’s “Strategically Minor: Isherwood’s Revision of Forster’s Mythology.”

negatively but also feared becoming affiliated with any of the available political parties, organizations, or ideologies. In *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood explains his uneasiness about allying himself with any nation, since as a homosexual he would be shunned by almost all of them.⁹ Later, he described his inability to fight the enemy, given his love for a German boy and long, and ultimately unsuccessful, struggle to bring his lover Heinz out of Germany for good. He wrote, “Every man in that [German] Army could be somebody’s Heinz” (*CK* 27). Isherwood’s long stay in Berlin also made him sympathetic to some Berliners who sided with the Nazis, not knowing the damage they would do. Noting the fascist use of “homosexual romanticism,” Isherwood explained that a fascist leader, if one had been so inclined and had gotten to him during his preparatory-school days, could have “converted [him] inside of half an hour” (*LS* 78). In *Mr. Norris*, Frl. Schroeder excitedly votes for the first time, for the Communists—at the behest of her lodgers—but by the time of *Goodbye to Berlin*, she has become a Nazi. “Isherwood” defends her: “She is merely acclimating herself, in accordance with natural law, like an

⁹ Isherwood’s homosexuality made him seem neutral not only on political issues but also on issues of sexuality and identity. Isherwood recognized the impossibility of representing his personae as homosexual, yet also resisted the pressure to present his persona as heterosexual. His narrators use what Marsha Bryant, following Wayne Koestenbaum’s terminology, refers to as “double talk” about gay identity (181). As a result, while some reviewers denigrated the persona as a “sexless nitwit” (*CK* 186), others presumably picked up on the numerous sly suggestions of the narrator’s sexual proclivities—in, for example, his joking reference to being “queer,” his fleeting references to dancing with both boys and girls at parties, and his frequent encounters with cross-dressers, sadomasochists, and other “deviants.” This feeling of community with the marginalized leads Isherwood to view many political groups as misguided, since even the best of them exclude others—and would probably exclude Christopher himself.

animal which changes its coat for the winter” (207).¹⁰ The image dehumanizes Frl.

Schroeder but also shows “Isherwood’s” sympathy for her.

Despite his reservations, Isherwood was also aware of the potential problems with pacifism as an answer, given the brutality of the Nazi regime. He does not simply use his ambivalence toward political affiliations as a way of evading social issues or avoiding taking a stand; rather, he draws our attention to his ambivalence and presents it as problematic. I have shown the way that Isherwood focuses on material things as part of a realm apart from politics, religion, and other systems of belief, a realm that will outlast the competing ideologies in Berlin and Europe as a whole. Now, I will suggest that Isherwood also uses his exteriorist style to draw attention to what will not outlast the coming conflict—human bodies.

Doing Business with a Corpse

If Isherwood offers things as an alternative to politics (and religion), he also uses characters’ physical bodies to distract from their political ideas. The novels frequently call attention to physical absurdities to undercut political rallies and demonstrations. Christopher recounts the spectacle of a crowd “roar[ing] with laughter” at a “fat little S.A. man” exerting himself ineffectually to keep pace with a Nazi demonstration (202).

¹⁰ Later adaptations of the Berlin novels have tended to make the Isherwood character take a stronger stance. Isherwood wrote disparagingly of the changes made to *Goodbye to Berlin* in its adaptation as the 1951 play *I Am a Camera*: when Frl. Schroeder (renamed Frl. Schneider in the play by Isherwood’s request, so as not to offend the woman who inspired the character) shifts her political loyalties from the Communists to the Nazis, the “Christopher character” scolds her for her denigration of Jews, “demonstrating the awakening of his conscience” (CK 130). In the novel itself, Frl. Schroeder never shows a hatred of Jews. These changes, Isherwood later suggested, downplay the complexity of the political climate and let his character—and, indeed, the audience—off the hook.

This type of comedy punctures the Nazi ethos and ideal of physical fitness in the same way as the slapstick in Charlie Chaplin's 1941 film *The Great Dictator*. However, Isherwood acknowledges that this kind of humor does not ultimately stop the Nazis from taking control. At many moments in the two Berlin novels, Isherwood uses dark physical comedy as a meager comfort in a rapidly changing, ever more dangerous world. He tells, for example, of a "shooting on the Bulowplatz" in which a "police-officer, revolver in hand, stumble[d] mortally wounded up the cinema steps to fall dead at the feet of a cardboard figure advertising a comic film" (177). The image encourages readers to relate the dead police officer to the lifeless cardboard figure; the juxtaposition is startling and even humorous, but it reinforces the idea that violence is ever-present in Berlin.

Isherwood's filmic style prevents him from accessing or speculating about people's inner states. Instead, he frequently focuses on characters as pure exteriors. References to grotesque bodies saturate the novels. Christopher's fellow lodger, Frl. Mayr, has a "bull-dog jaw, enormous arms and coarse strange-coloured hair" along with "fleshy arms" that "ripple unappetisingly" (*GB* 9). Frl. Schroeder engages in playful though sometimes startlingly violent fisticuffs, hurling her body around as she hugs, slaps, and kisses her lodgers. Repeatedly, Isherwood draws attention to the monumentality of her body, mentioning her "large bosom" and the "heart palpitations" (frequently faked) that lend themselves to grotesque comic setpieces (*GB* 7, 20). Arthur Norris has a jaw like a "broken concertina" (*MNCT* 3); the wealthy Baron Kuno von Pregnitz's monocle, "disengaged eyebrow," and "mouth sagging slightly at the corners" make it look like his face is disintegrating (24). Even the muscular youth Otto Nowak

(based on Isherwood's young lover Heinz), with his well-developed chest, has a "slightly ridiculous" body: "The beautiful ripe lines of the torso taper away too suddenly to his rather absurd little buttocks and spindly, immature legs" (*GB* 79). These bodies, with their disproportionality, their strangeness, and their seemingly broken parts, resemble the kitschy things displayed by Frl. Schroeder.

Isherwood does not only present bodies as things; he compares people to their possessions, finding both frustratingly impenetrable. As I suggested earlier, Isherwood dismisses people's attempts to use possessions to establish and express a personality. However, Isherwood does occasionally suggest that people are as mysterious and impenetrable as material things. The narrator notes that Bernhard has "something of the air of a bird in a piece of Chinese embroidery" and the "static potency of a carved ivory figure in a shrine" (154). He is intrigued but discomfited by Bernhard's smile, which has "the hostility of something ancient. I thought of one of the Oriental statuettes in his flat" (173). Christopher comments that Frl. Schroeder's kitschy things stand "like an uncompromising statement of her views on Capital and Society, Religion and Sex"; however, they do not provide any particular insight into these political or religious views (2). While "Isherwood" and Bradshaw do, commonly, convey impressions of characters through references to their possessions, the things almost always operate to illustrate their mystery. Rather than showcasing their personalities, the things become analogues for the characters' own resistant exteriority.

Mr. Norris Changes Trains begins with an attempt to decode both the psychology of a person and the contents of his luggage. Like *Goodbye to Berlin*, the book starts with

an emphasis on the visual: “My first impression was that the stranger’s eyes were of an unusually light blue. They met mine for several blank seconds, vacant, unmistakably scared.” William Bradshaw is in the process of meeting Arthur Norris, a fellow Englishman, on a train going across the Dutch-German border. The encounter between the strangers initially resembles a physical confrontation, as Bradshaw muses that it is “exactly as though we had collided in the street” (1). This reference to a physical collision emphasizes Bradshaw’s inability to know anything but the exterior of Norris, even though he becomes a friend. Bradshaw later tries, and fails, to determine whether Norris is telling the truth by looking him in the eyes: “Here were no windows to the soul. They were merely part of his face” (138). Despite the promise of harboring an inner “soul,” Norris is a thing, resistant to attempts to permeate his borders.

Bradshaw can only describe surfaces in detail, not penetrate them. The men prepare to go through customs and Norris becomes ever more nervous. Bradshaw watches Norris’s hands as they flutter nervously about his body: “For all they conveyed, he might equally have been going to undress, to draw a revolver, or merely to make sure I hadn’t stolen his money” (1). Bradshaw is intrigued by Norris’s strange behavior and stranger appearance, realizing, “with extreme interest, that he was wearing a wig,” but eventually concluding that Norris’s odd agitation comes from being “engaged in a little innocent private smuggling. Probably a piece of silk for his wife or a box of cigars for a friend” (3–4). This correlation of Norris’s secrets with physical objects—the silk he may be smuggling, the revolver he may be concealing, the body underneath his apparel and wig—suggests that Bradshaw’s fellow traveler is ultimately impenetrable: underneath his

surface are concealed many more surfaces. When the officials take a long time with Norris's passport before giving it back, Bradshaw comforts him by saying that it is common for them to confuse two people with the same name: "The most innocent people get mistaken for jewel thieves. They undress them and search them all over. Fancy if they'd done that to you!" (9).

As I will discuss in the fourth chapter, Isherwood is not the only thirties writer to focus on the process of getting things over international borders; Evelyn Waugh's novels feature many similar scenes. Indeed, Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930) refers to a woman who is mistaken for a jewel smuggler and strip-searched; Isherwood may be alluding to that scene. By opening the novel with the passport and customs examinations, Isherwood highlights both the increasing mobility of people and things in the interwar period and the increasing restriction of that movement.¹¹ Bradshaw, trying to bond with his nervous compatriot, draws on the political debates of the time, denouncing the "red-tape formalities" of checking passports and thinking to himself that Norris must be "some kind of mild internationalist; a member of the League of Nations Union" (3). The customs scene allows Isherwood once again to allude to the political divisions that were prevalent in the thirties, but then redirect attention from them to material things.

¹¹ Though passports had existed in various forms for centuries, they first became required for travel between European nations on a temporary basis during the First World War. Both Britain and Germany passed legislation to make the passport requirements permanent shortly after the war ended. Britain first required passports for all travel into and out of the country in 1914, with the wartime Aliens Restriction Act; the requirement was made permanent with the 1920 Aliens Act (Salter 82). Germany introduced similar legislation in June of 1919 (Torpey 116).

Passport and customs scenes appear in many interwar fictions, often drawing on this idea that people's interiors are inaccessible. Katherine Mansfield's story "Je Ne Parle Pas Français" (1919) features a metaphorical customs scene that, like *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, physicalizes the characters' inner selves or consciousnesses. The narrator Raoul, a voyeur who enjoys observing the customers of a coffee shop, claims that he does not "believe in the human soul" but thinks that people are "like portmanteaux—packed with certain things, started going, thrown about, tossed away, dumped down, lost and found, half emptied suddenly, or squeezed fatter than ever." This transmutation of people's psychological "baggage" into physical objects does not demystify them, however; rather, Raoul imagines himself as a customs official asking others if they have "anything to declare" and notes that the "hesitation" prompted by the idea of people smuggling contraband without his knowledge gives him a "thrill" (43).

In *Mr. Norris*, Bradshaw continues to try to understand the psychology and motivations of his friend, but his efforts continually make use of material things to try to see beneath the surface—a doomed effort, given that the things themselves are nothing but surface. In his first visit to his new friend's flat, Bradshaw snoops in Norris's dresser drawers, finding only a few lipsticks and an eye-pencil. (As befits one as thoroughly sham as he is, Norris wears cosmetics in addition to a wig.) Becoming increasingly suspicious of his friend's supposed business of importing and exporting, Bradshaw badgers him with questions as to which goods he handles; Norris flippantly opens another drawer, this one completely empty, to demonstrate his success as an exporter. The men's closest connection comes when Norris finally acknowledges that he wears a wig, an

announcement that gives both men the immense “relief” of “two people who have just made a mutual declaration of love” (19).

An aesthete who has resorted to espionage to finance his lavish lifestyle, Arthur Norris traffics in secrets, not goods. Yet time and again, he speaks of the information he passes in physical terms: telling Bradshaw that his conversations with informants are about the sale of “old furniture,” writing telegrams that use common objects like teapots as a key part of the code. Norris puts a high premium on the objects that surround him, believing that “to see me at my best, you must see me in my proper setting. A good table. A good cellar. Art. Music. Beautiful things” (46). His love of fine things is at odds with his precarious means of making a living, however, and Norris must frequently pawn and then retrieve his items. Like “Isherwood,” he gets a certain comfort from the endurance of things, speaking after one particular reversal of fortune of his furniture as “flotsam...which I have been able, happily, to save from the wreck” (90).

Like Isherwood’s representations of kitschy things, his attention to characters’ humorous and often grotesque bodies often allows him to shift his tone and focus quickly, from slapstick comedy to philosophical musings about the possibility of ever knowing another person. Much of Isherwood’s comedy is likely to produce only anxious laughter, as his thinglike characters resemble windup toys, violently—and, eventually, traumatically—bumping into one another. Lisa Colletta characterizes this kind of interwar British comedy as a “deeply ambivalent humor” that is “haunted by a sense of anxiety and powerlessness, marked by feelings of loss and uncertainty and shot through with the trauma of violence and the threat of further brutality” (41, 40). Though

Isherwood presents his characters' baffling bodies in similar ways to the strange kitschy things in Frä. Schroeder's home, he also makes clear that people's bodies are vulnerable to violence in ways that the things are not. By using violent imagery in concert with this treatment of people as things, Isherwood shocks readers into thinking about what makes people and things different from one another.

The violence in Berlin is so pervasive that, as Isherwood notes, one becomes inured or desensitized to it. Describing a "big row" in which Nazis smashed windows and beat Jews, "Isherwood" notes that the scene in itself was not "remarkable": "I remember it only because it was my first introduction to Berlin politics" (*GB* 139). Violence erupts without warning in the *Berlin Stories*—not only violence of a political nature but also personal and erotic violence—and this violence frequently excites spectators and sometimes even the victims of the brutality. Frä. Schroeder and Frä. Mayr are delighted by the domestic violence next door perpetrated against a woman they dislike: "He's smashing all the furniture!" "He's beating her black and blue!" (10). The unflappable reactions of passing pedestrians to beatings, knifings, and shootings make such conflicts "too much like a naughty schoolboy's game" to seem disturbing (203). "Isherwood" describes a Nazi demonstration in front of Jewish businesses as a "performance" with spectators who are "interested, amused or merely apathetic" (183). Descriptions of riots in *Mr. Norris* employ only the passive voice: "Knives were whipped out, blows were dealt with spiked rings, beer mugs, chair legs or leaded clubs; bullets slashed the advertisements on the poster columns, rebounded from the iron roofs of latrines" (86).

Such descriptions evacuate human beings of agency, making them into things that collide into one another, while making the implements of violence seem like agents.

Mr. Norris Changes Trains in particular shifts from a mostly exuberantly comic first half to a second half interspersed with stark reminders of Germany's political reality, as Berlin becomes more violent and unstable. Early in the novel, Isherwood calls attention to the unsettling ridiculousness of the bodies of his characters. Later chapters also focus on strange or grotesque bodies, but many of them have been deformed through Nazi violence. Though, in an early chapter, Isherwood invites our laughter at the way in which Baron Pregnitz's monocle seems to be "holding his face together" (24), a later account of his botched suicide while on the run from the police, telling us that he "fired crooked" and "nearly blew his eye out" puts the early comic concentration on bodies in a new and unsettling light (188).

Beneath Isherwood's provocatively comic approach to characters and their bodies lurks an anxiety about whether a person is ultimately replaceable—and about what, exactly, is the value of a human life. In one scene in *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher's rich pupil Herr Bernstein asks his wife, during dinner one night, not to take the car on her shopping trip in the afternoon, due to violent Nazi demonstrations in the area: "If they throw stones at you, I will buy you a sticking-plaster for your head. It will cost me only five groschen. But if they throw stones at my car, it will cost me perhaps five hundred marks" (18). Bernstein's joke raises the broader question of a person's value—particularly in a city in which people's lives are so frequently monetized, and people will do almost anything for money. The same concern with the monetary value of the human

person arises in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), in which the chorus girl Maude tells of her encounter with a man who remarks that "a girl's clothes cost more than the girl inside them" (45), because one can procure the attentions of a girl for five pounds but cannot purchase a coat or dress so inexpensively. When the narrator, Anna, protests, Maude laughs and interjects, "It's true, isn't it? People are much cheaper than things" (46).

Isherwood reveals the limitations of the comic focus on exteriors in the scene in *Goodbye to Berlin* in which his persona learns of Bernhard's death. Despite his constant references to characters' bodies, the narrator's final reduction of Bernhard to a corpse is shocking and abrupt. "Isherwood" keeps silent about his reaction to the death, reporting verbatim and with no interruptions the conversation he overhears in a Prague restaurant after his departure from Berlin telling of his friend's demise. The people who discuss Bernhard's death, a "fat man" and an "Austrian," say that the reported cause of death was heart failure, but that "anyone's heart's liable to fail, if it gets a bullet inside it." They laugh nervously over the incident: "'Never know who you're doing business with.' The fat man laughed. In his own way, he was rather macabre: 'It might be a corpse.'" The men quickly shift to the beginning of a ribald story: "'Did you ever hear the story of the Jew and the Goy girl with the wooden leg?'" (185).

The idea that one may be "doing business with a corpse" focuses on the object status of the human in a way that is humorous to the two businessmen but that is also designed to make readers queasy. The quick transition from the men's discussion of Bernhard's death to the joke about the girl with the wooden leg, whose condition calls

attention to the thinglike status of the person, reinforces the brutality of the reduction of Bernhard to his body. The concentration on the exterior of Bernhard's body is matched by an exteriorist style—a filmic, spectatorly style. “Isherwood” tells nothing of his own reaction to the conversation and does not speculate on the feelings of the two men, but the conversation suggests the viciousness of thinking of people as things. By finally reducing a person to a mere corpse, Isherwood makes clear what the repercussions of violent political upheaval will be.

Bernhard's death is made poignant by the fact that “Isherwood” unknowingly missed an opportunity to save his life. Bernhard extends an invitation to “Isherwood” to leave Berlin behind with him on an immediate trip to Peking—an apparent “joke” that “Isherwood” later decides was “perfectly serious” (181–182). This proposed getaway has an erotic tinge, as the men discuss visiting Warsaw and Moscow, enjoying the scenic route on the trans-Siberian railway. As “Isherwood” remarks to Bernhard, such a getaway would be wise, given the dangers awaiting Jews in Germany. When Bernhard says to “Isherwood” that his spirit belongs in Peking and might be “wafted” there after his death, Christopher interjects, “It'd be better if you let a train waft your body there, as soon as possible!” (181). Isherwood's reminder of Bernhard's body—given comic effect by being paired with the spiritually tinged word “waft”—calls our attention to exteriors, to bodies, but the exchange also emphasizes the inner spirit or consciousness lurking under the surface and in danger of being destroyed.

In a letter to his mother, Isherwood confessed that, while he was gratified by the generally positive critical response to *Mr. Norris*, he was surprised and put off by the

common consideration of it as a strictly comic novel. “I am much shocked at the callousness with which they all completely ignore the tragedy at the end,” he wrote. “They seem to find German politics just one long laugh” (*Kathleen* 11). In a subsequent letter, Isherwood wrote of his new work, which would eventually, after much revision and alteration, become *Goodbye to Berlin*, “I expect it will boil down to another ‘delightful little comedy,’ with not more than half a dozen deaths” (12). Isherwood later wrote that while the man on whom Bernhard was based did not die until after *Goodbye to Berlin* was published, he found at least one death necessary to communicate what was at stake in thirties Germany (*CK* 183). Of course, after Bernhard dies, his “accumulations of property” at the department store and at his home will live on. They are not nearly as fragile as Bernhard himself.

Isherwood is attracted to strange or kitschy things because he thinks that they have the best hope of surviving any violent conflict to come, yet he continues to express an anxiety about those things (and people) that cannot be replaced. As Isherwood suspected, a lot of death was to come soon to Germany, Britain, and the rest of Europe. Given his interest in material things and in the body as a thing, it is perhaps surprising that Bernhard’s is the only corpse that receives much attention in the *Berlin Stories*. In the next chapter, I will look at the thirties novels of Jean Rhys, who frequently focuses on those persons and things that test the limits of the subject and of the object—including, in particular, dead bodies, as well as things in the shape of human bodies that can be mistaken for persons. Isherwood encourages us to think of people as things, up to a point; Rhys is more willing to press the difficulty of considering people and things separately.

In her explorations of the corpse as a reminder of the thinglike nature of the subject and her meditations on the associations between things and death, Rhys's novels of the thirties expand on Isherwood's fascination with exteriors, the hybrid status of the person as both subject and object, and the pervasive experience of loss that seemed about to affect Europe.

CHAPTER THREE

TREES WALKING: BODIES AS THINGS AND
THINGS WITH BODIES IN JEAN RHYS'S FICTION

Like Isherwood, Jean Rhys was highly aware, during the thirties, that a new war was on the way. Her novels feature protagonists living on their own, often far from family and friends, in European cities—Paris, London, Vienna—filled with similarly rootless souls. Their disconnection and feeling of aimlessness is fueled by the perception that another war is imminent. One character, Sasha Jensen, remembers saying to herself after the end of the First World War (a time that seems very long ago), “The war is over. No more war—never, never, never” (*GMM* 114). Yet she goes out with acquaintances to “talk about the next war or something like that” (39), and recalls a friend who was always saying “I wish there’d be another war” because she wanted to be killed (133). She and other Rhys protagonists continue to remember the First World War, mentally separating their lives into the time before and the time after the conflict. “During the war...My God, that was a funny time!” Julia Martin thinks to herself in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. “The mad things one did—and everybody else was doing them, too. A funny time. A mad reckless time” (68). Cities are also filled with reminders of the war, and men wander the streets with false limbs due to war injuries.

Like Isherwood’s personae, Rhys’s lonely souls frequently respond to the threat of war and a feeling of disconnection from other people by thinking about and spending

time with things, even if these things do not return their affection and sometimes frustrate them. As I mentioned in the introduction, the first words in *Good Morning, Midnight* consist of an imagined utterance from the furnishings in Sasha Jensen's Paris hotel room: "‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’" (1). The room's imagined tone can be read as both comforting and threatening: the room offers Sasha a familiar presence, yet reminds her that her life never changes. Rhys's previous novel, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, also begins with a description of a contentious relationship between a woman and her furniture. Julia worries her landlady by coming home every evening "accompanied by a bottle" rather than a man (11). She spends hours staring at a "belligerent" wallpaper pattern and an ugly red sofa. Like the things in Isherwood's Frl. Schroeder's building, the ugliness of the things makes them seem hostile but also compelling. Their "belligerence" derives from their recalcitrant materiality—from the fact that Julia sees them as things, not objects. She thinks of everything in the room as "slightly distorted but full of obscure meaning" (10). Whatever meaning the things have is inaccessible to her. Sasha's and Julia's attribution of speech and expression to the things makes them seem human, or at least like they have some sort of inaccessible interiority. Yet their remote hostility emphasizes their otherness from people.

While Isherwood emphasizes the physical and occasionally dysfunctional aspect of human bodies, showing that people are themselves things (in addition to being human), Rhys makes bodies even less distinguishable from inanimate things. Her works are filled with examples of things in the shape of bodies, such as statues and mannequins. As I discussed in the previous chapter, things can fascinate people through their

impenetrable exteriors, which seem to hide inner “secret lives”: “Even when we wish to dispense with any talk about things, they may still be talking about us, sharing a secret life where they slowly conspire against us” (Brown, “How” 943). Though the prospect of any inanimate thing having life can be unnerving, since it puts the uniqueness of human beings into doubt, things in the shape of human bodies are especially uncanny. They suggest that a person—or at least a passable substitute—can be manufactured rather than born. A ghostly double, the humanlike thing suggests that our notions of human autonomy and individuality are illusions.

Rhys also focuses on the inverse, people who seem like things—including people whose livelihoods depend on seeming nearly inanimate. Rhys’s London and Paris are filled with people who are isolated from one another yet live in identical apartments and hotel rooms, whose minds are filled with the same movie lines repeating like gramophone records. Many of her characters work as “mannequins” or models. Rhys exploits the lexical confusion surrounding the word “mannequin”—which could, at the time of her writing, be used to describe either an inanimate store-window dummy or a young female model. Both types often appear in her stories. Her human “mannequins” have work that sometimes requires them to be nearly as quiescent as the store-window dummies. These mannequins only present a particularly extreme example of Rhys’s thinglike characters. These people have seemingly hard, aloof exteriors, making her protagonists worry that they are no more understanding or yielding than the unchanging material things that furnish their apartments and hotel rooms—that all people are the same, and all people are hostile. Often, Rhys’s characters think of other people as trees or flowers, entities

somewhere in between the person and the thing. In Rhys's interwar cities, identity categories such as nationality and gender seem to be shifting, but are as divisive as ever. Since the thing is, perhaps, the ultimate other, it provides a vocabulary for conceptualizing different types of Otherness.

Though Rhys criticism has traditionally focused more on her later novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* than on her early works, the last ten or fifteen years have seen an increase in attention to Rhys's novels of the thirties. Most Rhys critics continue to take a feminist or postcolonial approach. Many typically call attention to the way Rhys represents the body as well as to issues of gender and cultural difference in her novels. Celia Marshik and Carol Dell'Amico, for example, have analyzed the Rhys woman's dependency on sexual attractiveness to survive, and her dwindling aspects as her body ages. Earlier critics of the 1970s and 1980s—some of the first to discover Rhys's work—drew largely on the French feminism of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray to argue that Rhys advocates a more embodied, female language as an alternative to the disembodied discourse she associates with male authority figures.¹ In many of these analyses, the word “objectified” recurs as a description of the Rhys woman. My analysis takes a close look at what exactly it meant for the Rhys woman—or any of her other characters—to be considered or treated

¹ See Sue Thomas's *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999), Deborah Kelly Kloepfer's *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.* (1989), and Nancy R. Harrison's *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text* (1988). These critics call attention to the many moments in which language fails Rhys's women characters, arguing that a male Eurocentric control over discourse leaves it incapable of expressing themselves. Instead, they use a more physical, maternal language. Anne B. Simpson's *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (2005) is a more recent contribution to this strain of Rhys criticism, drawing on feminism and psychoanalytic theory to analyze Rhys's use of language, silence, and the body.

like an object, and how that condition reflected the instability of the interwar cities in Rhys's works.

I begin by identifying some of the examples Rhys uses to explore and unsettle the distinction between things and people. She frequently refers to trees, dead bodies, bodies on the threshold of death, and statues as examples of "test cases" which seem to be in between the categories of the human being and the thing. Drawing on the work of thing theorists such as Michael Taussig, I review the connection between things and death, focusing in particular on the dead or dying body—both in Rhys's works and in the popular imagination—as an entity in between the person and the thing. At the time of Rhys's writing, new technologies and ways of thinking about the body, some of which were explicitly tied to death, blurred the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. These new developments, including the increasing popularity of gramophones and film, lead Rhys's characters to consider people as copies or reproductions, functioning mechanically and repeating recordings in their minds. Yet as Hillel Schwartz claims in *The Culture of the Copy*, "The more adept the West has become at the making of copies, the more we have exalted uniqueness" (212). Rhys explores the interdependence of the drive toward uniqueness with a culture of copies or machines through the discourse of fashion. Fashion both promotes conformity and promises a way of showing one's distinctiveness. The fashion industry also encourages confusions between the person and the thing, prompting consumers to identify with display dummies and to attribute a kind of agency to clothing. I conclude by exploring the significance of

this attention to the object-as-other and the human as potentially reproducible thing in European cities on the brink of war.

Humanlike Things and Thinglike People

In the town of Waukegan, Illinois, in 2008, police responding to an explosion and fire at a strip mall were initially alarmed by what they thought were human bodies strewn on the street. But they weren't: the bodies were only mannequins from the Tuxedo World store, thrown into the street by the explosion. Impossibly pale-faced, dressed in their finery, some split into disembodied torsos and limbs, the mannequins looked both absurd and dramatic amid the rubble. I was visiting my parents in Waukegan at the time, and saw pictures of the scene on the newscasts. People had gathered to marvel at the hands, arms, heads, and tuxedo-clad torsos in the street.

Faced with inanimate things that seem human, people often react with shock, wonder, or laughter—or, frequently, some combination of the three. How else might one account for the popularity, through several hundred years, of Madame Tussauds Wax Museum? People marvel at the humanlike quality of the wax figures, even though some of what they show is violent and potentially frightening; in addition to sculptures of politicians and film stars, many of the museums feature replicas of heads on stakes and victims of Jack the Ripper. The grisly nature of what they represent underlines the connection between death and the human body at its most thinglike (and the thing at its most human). Literature, film, and television are filled with narratives that point to the difficult distinction between the person and the humanlike thing: narratives in which mannequins or statues suddenly come to life, and narratives in which what appeared to be

a human being is revealed to be a robot or other nonhuman form (usually through the machine malfunctioning or being split into pieces).

Numerous critics have proposed that thinking about “thingness”—about what makes the object Other—almost always involves thinking about death. Michael Taussig notes that the “distinction between subject and object, between me and things” is “crucially dependent on life and death,” but also notes that the nature of this connection is amorphous: “Why is death the harbinger and index of the thing-world, and how can it be, then, that death awakens life in things?” (“Dying” 381). A deceased person’s belongings seem to take on life as they retain some trace of the person. His or her things and home may be arranged for life to continue: the calendar with a future date marked, the magazine left open on the table, the refrigerator and pantry stuffed with items to eat. As Taussig suggests, the deceased person’s body is also on the threshold between personhood and thinghood.² The corpse is mere material, yet it is impossible to separate the corpse from the subjectivity that used to animate it. It serves as an eerie reminder of our own limited and decaying human bodies, while also seeming to harbor otherworldly secrets, as all things can.

Corpses are not the only bodies that provide threatening reminders of living people’s own mortality and bodies. Laura Tanner suggests that the terminally ill person is even “more of a threat” to the healthy subject than the corpse, because he or she “exhibits the bodily signs of impending death while yet resisting the inanimate coldness that helps

² Taussig, an anthropologist, also writes that many societies hold two funerals to ease the passing of the spirit of the dead person from this world into the next (307). The need for more than one ceremony indicates the continuing process through which the dead body moves from being considered a person to being considered a thing.

us to classify the corpse as Other” (23). For Tanner, the sick body is not only between life and death but also between self and Other, confronting the healthy with the horrors of their own bodies and their lack of control over them.³

Though the body near death can, as Tanner suggests, threaten healthy onlookers with the reminder that they too inhabit bodies that can sicken and die, the sick body can also remind us of what Elaine Scarry refers to as the “unsharability” of experience. As she suggests, pain is an extreme state of feeling that emphasizes the “split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and someone else’s” (4). A person in extreme pain is consumed by that experience but cannot precisely describe that experience to others. Indeed, Scarry notes that pain produces a “state anterior to language,” as expressions of pain often take the form of cries and moans (5). Though Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* predates the recent critical “turn toward things,” her work engages with similar questions about the difference between the person and the thing. As she suggests, speaking on behalf of or interpreting the desires of the very ill person is as difficult as speaking on behalf of other entities that cannot speak their experience: things, animals, literary characters.

³ Tanner and Scarry, whom I discuss below, both draw upon the work of Julia Kristeva, who identifies the corpse as the ultimate border between the self and the other, the person and the thing. The corpse is abject because it reminds the subject of his or her own physicality, mortality—the “body fluids” and “defilement” and “shit” that are “cast aside in order to live” (3). In a gloss of Kristeva’s work, Peter Schwenger writes that this association of the corpse with borders comes from the “residual subjectivity” of the dead body, marking it as an entity “between subject and object” (157). Even when the spark of life has left a person, it is impossible for others to think of that person’s body as mere inanimate matter or to treat it as such.

Rhys is attentive both to the frustrated desire to share experience that Scarry describes and to the threatened sense of self-differentiation that, as Tanner notes, comes from seeing the ill or abject body. Her characters shift from sharing the pain of others to disassociating themselves completely, even laughing at others' pain. Often, Rhys represents bodies on the threshold of death, near crossing over to the world of things. The focus on the dying body is the most sustained in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), in which the exiled Englishwoman Julia Martin returns to London from Paris as her mother—long ill and in a vegetative state—is dying. Like Rhys's other women, Julia is a cosmopolitan, down-on-her-luck woman moving from one tawdry flat to the next, depending on the financial patronage of various men, a prospect becoming increasingly difficult as she ages. (Julia is an example of a common type of woman in Rhys's works that most critics simply refer to as the "Rhys woman.") Her sister, the obedient Norah, has spent all of her adult life caring for Mrs. Martin and meeting the expectations of older relatives. The sisters' fraught, resentful conversations reveal their fears both of becoming like each other and of becoming like their sick mother, suffering mutely in bed. Norah says that "the way people die doesn't bear thinking of" (72). This statement suggests both that people cannot bear to think of how others die—which one might consider a criticism of people's ability to empathize, or a reminder of the pain of empathy—and that the experience of thinking of how others die does not bear fruit, that understanding the way people die is both impossible and impractical.

Described as an "inert mass," a "shapeless mass," and a "dead weight," Mrs. Martin represents the human subject at its most objectlike—and is therefore a key figure

for the inaccessibility of the mental states of the Other. Those who surround her attempt vainly to interpret her rare utterances. She howls and winces, entering Scarry's "state anterior to language." Yet others insist that she feels no pain. A nurse tells Julia, "She isn't conscious. She isn't suffering at all" (122). While Norah appears to accept this explanation, Julia is less certain. Her uncertainty reflects the difficult task of imagining what is going on "inside" other people's bodies and consciousnesses: are others merely things? How can we know how they think and feel? If sick people's lives are so circumscribed by their bodies, are our actions or possibilities similarly limited by our bodies?

Even after dying, Julia's mother is not entirely a thing—or, at least, her family cannot consider her to be one. After she dies, they continue to attempt to fulfill her wishes, as many grieving families do. Norah consults with Julia over whether the funeral should have a choir because "I think she'd have liked it" (127). She gives Julia their mother's ring because "she'd have liked you to have something" (133). This urge to obey the "wishes" of the dead shows how difficult it is to accept death, and to accept the object status of the mother's body, especially given the length of her debilitating condition. In her vegetative state, Mrs. Martin has conveyed no wishes to anyone (or at least not in any way that another person can understand). Speaking on her behalf is as challenging as speaking on the behalf of something not human—an animal or a thing, as Scarry suggests—that cannot speak for itself. But Julia looks on her mother's dead body as the "thing that was behind all this talking and posturing" (130). It reminds her that she is also a thing.

Julia's memories show that even before her illness, Mrs. Martin presented a thinglike resistance to interpretation. On visiting her mother, Julia hears her say something that she interprets as "orange-trees"—a possible reference to the Brazil of Mrs. Martin's youth. The utterance prompts Julia to recollect her relationship with her mother in her childhood, and the "innumerable romances" she had "woven...about her mother's childhood in South America, when she had asked innumerable questions, which her mother had answered inadequately or not at all, for she was an inarticulate woman" (105). The phrase "inarticulate woman" links the past Mrs. Martin to the present one, suggesting that even before her transformation into an "inert mass" Julia's mother was opaque and thinglike, showing Julia only her exterior. Coming from South America to England, she "accept[ed] transplantation as a plant would have done" (105). The plant metaphor puts Mrs. Martin somewhere in between a living person and an inanimate thing; not unrelatedly, she becomes a "log" in bed after her illness (106).

The comparison of Mrs. Martin to a plant or a tree is part of a larger pattern in Rhys's work. Rhys often addresses the inaccessibility of other people's mental states by using trees as an image or metaphor. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha remembers giving birth to a son who died, apparently because she did not have enough money to pay for the medical care he needed. Waiting in the hospital, she lived "plunged into a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets" (90).⁴ Her "dream" emphasizes both the thinglike

⁴ I will not discuss Rhys's use of the mask imagery here, but Elaine Savory points out that masks recur in almost all of Rhys's major works. Savory emphasizes the masks' use

nature of people—faces like masks, bodies like puppets—and the curious life of nonsentient nature. The animateness of the trees seems to have a proportional relationship with the inanimateness of people: the more objectlike humans become, the more lifelike nonhumans appear to be.

Comparisons between trees and people also appear in Rhys's other works. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna Morgan looks every morning at a frightening tree that resembles a person with "stumps instead of arms and legs" (9). If trees offer an analogue for the unknowability of the human other, they also, in their undisguised alienness from people, offer relief from human society. Trees require no understanding or emotional support. Julia prefers trees to people, in an interior monologue in which she thinks of herself in the second person: "When you were a child, you put your hand on the trunk of a tree and you were comforted, because you knew that the tree was alive—you felt its life when you touched it—and you knew that it was friendly to you, or, at least, not hostile. But of people you were always a little afraid" (158).

Rhys would continue to use trees as figures to express the difficulty of determining what others are thinking and feeling. Her unfinished 1976 autobiography *Smile Please* concludes with a transcription of a cross-examination entitled "The Trial of Jean Rhys" from Rhys's 1947 diary, in which she employs two voices to question her beliefs and her relationships with other people. To the questions of an interrogator, Rhys's responding voice professes to "only know" herself, as she sees others as "trees walking." A new voice, labeled the "Counsel for the Prosecution," seizes on this bit of

in Caribbean culture, where they are used in parody and doubling as a way of critiquing European culture (106).

evidence: “There you are! Didn’t take long, did it?” (131).⁵ Rhys critiques herself for her supposed failure to empathize with others or to see them as truly human. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha also admonishes herself not to think of people as trees: “The clouds are clouds, trees are trees, people are people, and that’s that. Don’t mix them up again. No, I won’t” (139).

The idea that people see each other as trees walking appears in many interwar fictions, and thing theorists have commented on the idea that the tree is an entity in between the person and the thing. While trees are living things rather than inanimate objects, their lack of sentience positions them in between the person and the thing. In *Solid Objects*, Douglas Mao writes of the prevalence of trees in Virginia Woolf’s work, focusing in particular on Septimus Smith’s discovery that “trees are alive”—words echoed by both Julia and Sasha in Rhys’s novels—an insight he considers so important that he envisions telling it to the prime minister. Mao suggests that “with their uncanny air of death-in-life, of being nearly but not quite sentient, trees foreground the absence of feeling in the object world as few other objects can” (48). Trees, like corpses, seem to exist on the boundary between living and dead. By relating trees to people, Rhys questions whether human beings can share this same “absence of feeling”—at times acknowledging the appeal of the trees’ aloof stability and at times lamenting their hardness and solidity.

⁵ The phrase “trees walking” comes from Mark 8:24, in which a blind man describes seeing “men as trees walking” before Jesus restores his sight. The phrase also appears in Elizabeth Bowen’s novel *To the North* (1932), where Emmeline Summers, with her glasses off, sees the guests at a party as trees walking.

Sasha's statement that "trees are trees" and "people are people" is one example among many of the Rhys woman's attempts to classify types of people and things and keep the categories separate. Sasha repeats to herself her friend Sidonie's mantra that "one mustn't put everything on the same plane," and expands on the expression: "And one mustn't put everybody on the same plane, either" (*GMM* 12). She suggests that people are so different from one another that they cannot even be compared, given that there is no common metric for comparison. Yet the fact that so many characters seem compelled to assert difference between types of people betrays a fear that the Other is really not so different after all—that, in cities bringing together people from various nationalities, in which gender roles are changing, identity categories are becoming unstable. Norah shows that the "opinion which foreigners might have of London" is a "matter of complete indifference to her" (*ALMM* 76). Many others also express a prejudice against foreigners, even though the national identities of Rhys's characters are extremely uncertain and often hybrid. Sasha is nearly asked to leave her hotel because the nationality marked on her passport does not match the nationality that she reported to the proprietor; she was born English, but has traveled widely and was married to a French man (*GMM* 14). When Sasha meets two Russian men, they "stop under a lamp-post to guess nationalities" (46). "The life of a man and the life of a woman can't be compared," says Julia's former lover Mr. James. "What's the use of talking nonsense about it? Look at cocks and hens, it's the same sort of thing" (*ALMM* 115). Despite this supposed impossibility of comprehension, in cities filled with men and women, natives and

foreigners, it is necessary to respond to the presence of others—even if that means simply grappling with their utter opacity and incomprehensibility.

A series of connected scenes in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* brings together the statue, the tree, and the dead body as fascinating and troubling entities that call into question the exact distinction between persons and things. In London, Julia brings a young man, George Horsfield, to spend the night at her flat. Descending the stairs quietly the next morning, Horsfield sees a “white face” glinting in the hallway and “brace[s] himself for an encounter.” As he knows, flats like Julia’s are frequent sites for affairs, but landladies typically disapprove of single women coming home accompanied by men, so he fears being caught. Upon closer inspection, however, he realizes that it is only a bust of the Duke of Wellington (155). His relief is short-lived, because once out the door Horsfield encounters a policeman “staring disapprovingly” at him. The elements of the night and morning run together for him: “‘This is grotesque,’ muttered Mr. Horsfield. He did not know whether he meant the policeman, or his excess of caution, or the Duke of Wellington, or the night he had just spent” (156).

Horsfield recognizes the episode as “humorous,” yet both the bust and the policeman jar him, in ways that get to the heart of the uncanny effects of thinglike people and humanlike things in Rhys’s interwar works. Despite their ontological differences, the Wellington statue and the police officer have specific, and similar, symbolic valences; they are figures representative of power, authority, and England. Yet Rhys does not

particularly emphasize the potential symbolic meanings.⁶ In presenting the statue as merely a face to be “encountered” and “braced” for, Rhys emphasizes its material aspects, just as Isherwood emphasizes the material aspects of the bust of Bismarck in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. The confusion of the statue with an actual person also emphasizes the material, thinglike nature of people. The policeman, like the statue, is stationary, “staring disapprovingly” (or is this only Horsfield’s imagination?) with “his legs very wide apart and his mouth pursed” (156). When Horsfield greets him, he gives no answer.

A later encounter on the stairs to Julia’s flat again calls our attention to the boundary between the person and the thing. On a later night, as the couple is mounting the stairs in silence, Horsfield is startled when, after he touches her hand, Julia screams several times. She demands to know who touched her and awakens her alarmed landlady (who evicts her the next day for bringing a man home with her). Julia explains, “I thought it was—someone dead...catching hold of my hand” (165). The hallucination is likely caused by Julia’s attendance at her mother’s funeral earlier in the day, during which she had to confront the corpse. That the (imagined) encounter with “someone dead” occurs in the same place as Horsfield’s encounter with the statue encourages us to think also about the distinction between person and thing. Both of these encounters also happen in the

⁶ In addition, Wellington’s image was so frequently reproduced by the time of the novel that it was as likely to be associated with kitsch and clutter as with heroism. A 1935 book called *The Iconography of the First Duke of Wellington*, cowritten by the seventh Duke of Wellington, catalogued representations of Wellington “on walls, snuff-boxes, tea-services, fans, bells, door-stops, brooches, notebooks, clocks, watches, barometers, and razors” (qtd. in Sinnema 52). The proliferation of the image in such places likely worked to counter the initial association of Wellington with august heroism, making the statue Horsfield encountered as likely an example of chintzy clutter.

evening or early morning, in the threshold space of the stairs. They highlight the boundary between the living and the dead, the human world and the thing world, the night and the day.

Julia's imagining of someone dead making physical contact with her notably contrasts with the noncommittal attitude of the others in the building. Upon hearing the screams, a dark man with "tousled hair" and "striped pajamas" gives "one look; then, without a word or a change of expression" returns to his room. Julia's landlady, in a dressing-gown and hair-net, comes to see what has happened but "gaze[s] at some point beyond both Julia and Mr. Horsfield" (166). Even Horsfield, torn between his shock at Julia's reaction and his sympathy for her, involuntarily stares at her "as though he had never seen her before"—his attitude of stony indifference recalling the earlier hostility of the policeman (164). The apartments and cheap hotels in Rhys's works, while bringing people physically close to one another, also prompt division. At another, similar place, Julia thinks, "we're like mites in a cheese in that damned hotel" (181). The frequent, brief (and sometimes jarring) encounters with other people that such places foster are not so different from the frequent, brief encounters people in the city have with mannequins, statues, and other inanimate things. Julia encounters only the exteriors of other people, and their inner lives or selves are as elusive as the potential "secret lives" of things.

In a later scene, Julia passes by a river, entranced by what she imagines are arms dancing and beckoning in the water. A passing policeman, apparently believing that Julia has come to the river to commit suicide, assures her that the shadows are only the branches of trees, but Julia is not convinced. (The presence of the policeman links the

scene to Horsfield's earlier encounter with the Wellington statue, followed by his encounter with a police officer, upon leaving Julia's apartment.) In this moment, not only do the tree branches—if that is indeed what they are—weaken the divide between subject and object, person and thing in their movement and resemblance to human arms, but also the branches weaken the division between Julia herself and the object of her gaze. Julia is entranced by the branches because she imagines them to be the arms of someone, not waving but drowning, in the river; the officer assumes that she herself is the one who plans to drown. Since readers are given no access to Julia's consciousness in the scene, we have no way of knowing whether his assumption is correct. Indeed, given the evidence in Rhys's other works, we might be inclined to believe the police officer, as Rhys's women frequently have suicidal thoughts and, especially, fantasize about drowning.⁷

This scene occurs at the end of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, leaving Julia in a state between life and death. All of Rhys's interwar novels end with the main character in a similarly indeterminate state. In *Quartet*, Marya begins to depend on a lover, Heidler, while her husband Stephan is in prison. Her paralyzing dependency makes her a "marionette" (105) and "a thing. Quite dead. Not a kick left in her" (123). When Stephan returns from prison, he beats her viciously when he learns of her love for Heidler. It is unclear whether the beating has killed her. Stephan tells a woman outside that there is "no

⁷ Sasha speaks of wanting to drink herself to death or to drown herself in the Seine; Anna ponders "making a hole in the water" (*VD* 164). In *Quartet*, Marya pauses in front of the Seine, watching "yellow lights like jewels, like eyes that winked at her" and "red lights like splashes of blood on the stealthy water," until a young man asks, "Is it for tonight the suicide?" (49).

one there” in the room, a possible reference to her death (185). Sasha, lying drunk on her bed at the close of *Good Morning, Midnight* after a failed sexual encounter, considers herself as “strong”—and as motionless—“as the dead” (182). Anna nearly dies of an abortion at the end of *Voyage in the Dark*; a doctor, who moves “like a machine that was working smoothly,” tends to her (188). The machine image emphasizes the thinglike nature not only of the ailing Anna but also of the doctor, who is healthy and alive.

Film Minds and False Arms in the Interwar City

Perhaps there have always been questions about how to distinguish people from things: there is, to be sure, a certain timelessness to the wonder and horror evoked by inanimate bodies such as automata, ventriloquist’s dummies, and store mannequins. Narratives from Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* to contemporary science-fiction movies center on the prospect of humanlike entities coming to life. Pygmalion falls in love with his own sculpture. Pinocchio is transformed into a real boy. Yet in the time between the wars, lifelike inanimate bodies were a source of particular fascination, and registered changes to ways of thinking about the body. This was, after all, the time of newly realistic mannequins in store windows, a time in which massive numbers of soldiers injured in the war acquired artificial legs and arms, making their bodies partly animate, partly inanimate. It was a time, also, in which the new popularity of diets and exercise programs promoted more uniform body types—making people more similar to those mannequins.⁸ Rhys refers to people who use new technologies to replace body parts or

⁸ Juliet Gardiner surveys the expansion of fitness clubs and health programs in *The Thirties: An Intimate History of Britain* (514–24). Caroline Evans notes that the 1920s witnessed the birth of a “body which conformed with the modernist aesthetic, which was

artificially extend their bodies, as people talk about or see examples of false limbs. Sasha reads of a “woman who had got her breasts lifted” while waiting to have her hair dyed as part of her own personal “transformation act” (*GMM* 62, 63). While people have altered their bodies throughout history, this specific type of physical transformation is specific to Rhys’s time: The first breast augmentation surgeries were performed at the turn of the century, and the practice became more widespread through the twenties and thirties.

This interest in artificial bodies and artificial extensions to the human body can be found in other interwar writers’ work. Tim Armstrong argues that modernism is “characterized by the desire to *intervene* in the body; to render it part of modernity, by techniques which may be biological, mechanical, or behavioral” (6). In 1939, he notes, Gerald Heard—the inspiration for Isherwood’s character Arthur Norris—coined the term “mechanomorphism” to describe the blending of the human body with mechanical extensions such as prostheses (78). Such techniques rendered the status of the human body ambiguous—was it animate or inanimate? Where did the human end and the non-human begin?

A key example of this fascination with the limits of the human body comes in Djuna Barnes’s gallery of grotesques in *Nightwood* (1937). In one particularly telling scene, Felix Volkbein goes to a party to see people act as “living statues.” The party includes Frau Mann, an acrobat whose leotard and tights are “so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll,” and Dr. Matthew O’Connor, a randy crossdresser who tells a story about a legless woman who wheels herself on a board. He says, “I wanted to give

functional and anti-decorative; this body was, and continues to be, ‘produced,’ through diet and exercise, very much along the lines of Fordist production” (*Fashion* 172).

her a present for what of her was missing, and she said, ‘Pearls!—they go so well with everything!’ Imagine, and the other half of her still in God’s bag of tricks!’” (26). Felix’s own stories about his family history show a hunger to forge his own identity and past: he is the son of a man who spent a lifetime denying his Jewish heritage, and like his father, he claims that he has an aristocratic Catholic family background. Yet the partygoers demonstrate how the desire to remake oneself could take a vividly literal, physical form. Frau Mann becomes one with her leotard; the legless woman extends her body by adding the board and wheels. The range of examples suggests the limitations of the body—the absence of the woman’s legs, the shame of Frau Mann’s “sex”—but also the possibilities such extensions to the body as artificial limbs and even clothing could present.

New technologies such as the typewriter, the wireless set, the movie camera, and the gramophone also altered ways of thinking about the body. In extending or shaping the capabilities of the senses, they provided new metaphors for the way the body and mind work—and, indeed, the word *typewriter* could at the time be used to denote either the machine or the person using it.⁹ The best-known interwar representation of a typist is probably T. S. Eliot’s young woman who “smoothes her hair with automatic hand” and turns on a record after her sexual encounter with the “young man carbuncular” in *The*

⁹ See Sadie Plant’s *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* for a history of the association of women workers, such as typists, with their machines. The use of the word *typewriter* for either a person or a thing is similar to the use of the word *mannequin* for either a human model or an inanimate dummy.

Waste Land, her mechanical gesture resembling the movement of the gramophone.¹⁰ The association of the young woman with both the typewriter and the gramophone indicates that modern technologies could make people seem less than, or other than, human.

Indeed, gramophones were marketed as being in between the person and the thing. As Sebastian D.G. Knowles and Michael North have pointed out, gramophones were originally advertised as a way to preserve the voices of deceased loved ones.¹¹ Michael Taussig has written insightfully of the iconic RCA Victor “His Master’s Voice” advertisement, which shows a dog cocking his ear in wonderment as the gramophone “magically” replicates the voice of its owner. The advertisement emphasizes the uncanny troubling of the boundary between person and thing that gramophones effected: Based on a painting called *His Late Master’s Voice*, the gramophone seems to allow the “master” to speak from beyond the grave (Taussig, *Mimesis* 193–211). In identifying the gramophone with the dog—whose posture mimics the shape of the device—the advertisement seems to seek out an ontological category for it, showing that it is not quite human, but still seemingly alive. Some people criticized the artificial replication of the living voice. For example, John Philip Sousa wrote, “comes now the mechanical device to sing for us a song or play for us a piano, in substitute for human skill, intelligence, and

¹⁰ For more examples of human “automata” and automatic behavior in modernist poetry, see Alan Ramon Clinton’s *Mechanical Occult: Automatism, Modernism, and the Specter of Politics*.

¹¹ In this, the gramophone was similar to the photograph, commonly used in its early years to capture deathbed images, particularly of children. In preserving the voice or image of the deceased, the gramophone or photograph could be seen to capture something of the essence of the living person—becoming, at least in some people’s imaginations, an entity in between the living person and the dead thing. See Cathy N. Davidson’s “Photographs of the Dead: Sherman, Daguerre, Hawthorne.”

soul” (qtd. in Knowles 2). His critique stresses the uncanny liminality of the gramophone, as something that can “sing” like a person, but minus a “soul.” This notion that “soulless” things like gramophone records could replicate (or nearly replicate) human capabilities is frightening because it suggests that the difference between the living human voice and the synthetic reproduction of it might one day be lost.

Rhys’s women themselves have bodies and minds that are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and seemingly mechanized. Sasha urges herself to be “a bit of an automaton—but sane,” avoiding memories and emotional disturbances by sticking to a schedule, but she also fears the starting of the “gramophone” of memory in her head saying “Here this happened—here that happened” (15, 17). She bemoans her “film-mind,” which unreels the past like the present before her eyes, seemingly unmediated (176). The gramophone or film mentality, while it sometimes saves Sasha from reliving past traumas by focusing on a daily routine, threatens to make her into a reproduction rather than a unique individual. Indeed, nearly all of the things in Rhys’s work—from gramophones to popular art hung on walls—are the result of mass production. Flats and hotel rooms include popular paintings, gramophone recordings, and the same bed and side table in each. Anna changes flats frequently, but she is “followed” by an array of kitschy, sentimental paintings from *The Cries of London*, a genre of painting popular from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, showing a variety of “criers” or sellers hawking their trades.¹² Sasha thinks, “All rooms are the same...why should I worry about

¹² These portraits of the lower classes could be satirical, but by the Victorian Age they were more likely to be sentimental and sanitized. As Sean Shesgreen, in his comprehensive overview of the history of these images, shows, by the twentieth century

changing my [hotel] room?” (38). Similarly, the people in these nearly identical rooms may have (Sasha and others fear) nearly identical minds, simply borrowed from gramophone recordings and films they recall.

Like Sasha, Julia regards being an automaton as both necessary and undesirable. She decides to go to London because a car honks before she counts to three, and thinks that relying on chance in this way is “the only reasonable way to live” (72). Others around her seem like automata, as well. Julia is depressed by the couple in the next room of her Paris hotel, whose gramophone announces their sexual couplings. She watches the woman with her lover, “stroking his thigh upwards from the knee with a smooth, regular gesture” similar to the repeated gestures of the gramophone; the man’s expression is both “sensual and bored” (18). Julia’s own sexual and romantic encounters are similarly mechanistic. With Horsfield, she smiles “mechanically” and reminds him of a “clockwork toy that has nearly run down” (148). A mantra like a “clock” in Julia’s head ticks “Nothing matters, nothing matters” (*ALMM* 166); a similar mantra in her sister Norah’s mind ticks “You’re young yet—young yet—young yet” (139). The words lose their meaning in endless repetition.

In thinking of behavior as mechanical, these characters suggest that their thoughts are not their own, and are not unique but reproductions of past events or memories picked up from elsewhere. They frequently reproduce in their minds lines from films and popular songs, which often have no apparent relation to what is happening around them. Horsfield, looking into Julia’s saddened eyes, suddenly recalls a line from a comic film:

these images were “belittled” or “ignored as antiquarian, popular, or ephemeral” by serious art collectors” (3).

“‘Pa was a colonel. I was seduced by a clergyman at a garden-party. Pa shot him. Heavens, how the blighter bled!’” (48). Sasha remembers working for a flighty rich woman whose half-formed thoughts were “all washing about, like the bilge in the hold of a ship.” Her thoughts spilled out seemingly randomly, as she repeated received wisdom and uninformed personal opinions: “Adler is more wholesome than Freud, don’t you think? – English judges never make a mistake – The piano is quite Egyptian in feeling” (168).

The people in Rhys’s cities are also, to use Gerald Heard’s term, mechanomorphs, or hybrids of living and nonliving parts. This physical hybridity takes away the integrity of the body, its difference from the inanimate things that surround it. In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia looks at “windows exhibiting casts of deformed feet, stuffed dogs and foxes,” and pictures of people. The objects she looks at are all inanimate, but they are all linked to life in some way: they are depictions of living people, or corpses of animals, or representations of fragments of the human body. They underline the difficulty of entirely separating living parts from nonliving parts in Rhys’s work and, to some extent, in interwar life.

As unsettling as the casts of deformed feet in a store window may be, it is perhaps more disconcerting to discover that one’s lover or family member has detachable body parts. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna receives a letter from her older lover Walter Jeffries, telling her that he no longer wants to see her. An eighteen-year-old dependent on work as a chorus girl to survive, Anna has been able to live more grandly with Walter’s assistance. Yet while Walter takes the temporary and pecuniary nature of their

relationship for granted, the inexperienced Anna believes that they are in love. The letter reminds her of an episode from her youth in Dominica, when she was walking along a passage where “knots in the wood were like faces,” past her sleeping uncle Bo. Anna was frightened to see “long yellow tusks like fangs [come] out of his mouth and [protrude] down to his chin,” as his dentures had fallen out while he slept (92). Even though Anna does not make the connection—telling herself only that “This letter has nothing to do with false teeth” (94)—the discovery of Uncle Bo’s false teeth, like the letter, reminds her of the threatening unknowability of other people. Tellingly, this analogous situation transforms a revelation about what might be considered a person’s feelings or intentions—his intangible, incorporeal inner states—into a discovery about that person’s physical body. While the uncle’s false teeth are usually on the “interior” of his body, they are another set of exteriors, ultimately impenetrable.

References to artificial or “false” body parts pervade Rhys’s work, and Rhys links them to the difficulty of knowing how others experience the world. After Julia’s mother’s funeral in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Uncle Griffith—a stolid, self-satisfied man who disapproves of Julia’s way of life—warns of pickpockets who wear “false arms” that “they kept ostentatiously over their chests while the real ones did the job” (*ALMM* 132). The family laughs over the absurd image of thieves with two left arms, but the rest of the conversation brings out the image’s broader implications about the suspicion engendered by others’ strange bodies. Speaking of Dostoevsky’s novels, Julia’s Uncle Griffith says, “Why see the world through the eyes of an epileptic?” In response, Julia speaks “mechanically, as one’s foot shoots out when a certain nerve of the knee is struck: ‘But

he might see things very clearly, mightn't he? At moments'" (133). The reference to Dostoevsky as an epileptic emphasizes a person's alienation from a body he or she cannot always control. Even Julia's defense that an epileptic might see "clearly" appears as an involuntary physical response, a reflex.

The reference to Julia's metaphorical foot reflex reminds us that even one's own body parts can seem as alien as the false limbs on the pickpockets, removed from the control of the mind. Another memorable reference to a foot reflex appears in *Voyage in the Dark*, in which Anna moves to a flat with a woman named Ethel in exchange for helping at Ethel's massage and manicure business. The shabby flat and shady manicure business is actually intended to be a place of prostitution—something that Anna, in her naiveté, does not realize.¹³ The bitter, alcoholic Ethel breaks a massage couch, sending a male client's foot into a pail of boiling water. Ethel becomes angry, though Anna can only laugh: "But his foot kept jerking up and down, as a thing does when it is hurt. Long after you have stopped thinking about it, it keeps jerking up and down." The passage establishes both the surprise and even joy prompted by the seemingly independent life of a body part removed from the conscious control of the mind, and Anna's detachment from other people's feelings and pain. She cannot sympathize with the (nameless) man, only laugh at the behavior of his unpredictable body.

¹³ Ethel remarks to Anna shortly after Anna moves in that "there were detectives calling and wanting to see my references and my certificates" once she opened the massage parlor, suggesting that the clients (who are all male) are paying not for massages but for sex (139). After teaching Anna how to manicure, she adds cryptically, "Of course...you must be a bit nice to them" (140). When Anna tells her friend Laurie that she did not go into the bedroom when a client asked her to, Laurie responds, "I bet the old girl wasn't pleased" (142). Prostitution is one among many occupations in Rhys's work that emphasize the body.

Frequently, Rhys links the prevalence of artificial limbs to the memory of a previous war and the prospect of another to come soon. Sasha's description of sightseeing in Paris demonstrates the seeming interchangeability of natural bodies and prostheses: "I had looked at this, I had looked at that, I had looked at the people passing in the street and at a shop-window full of artificial limbs" (*GMM* 11). These artificial limbs are likely, as Armstrong suggests, for men wounded in the war, one reminder among many in Rhys's works of the war's aftermath (Armstrong 101). Later, Sasha has a nightmare about a man with a hand made of steel (13). The hand points to a sign advertising the 1937 Exposition des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, mentioned several times in Rhys's novel. The exposition, meant to be a celebration of international culture, instead became known for displays of militarism. It featured monuments from a variety of nations, including, most notably, the German tower "with its National Socialist eagle perching atop a swastika" which "faced off against Vera Mukhina's enormous *Worker and Collective Farm Woman*, striding forth in the name of the Soviet Union" (Herbert 4). The Spanish pavilion showed Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica*, created to commemorate the bombing that led to the death of nearly 2,000 civilians (Ginzburg 115). Rhys repeatedly links synthetic or fragmented body parts to war and violence as well as to the unknowability of the human Other.

"Wear Me, Give Me Life, and I Will Do My Damndest for You!"

In the examples I have offered so far, Rhys has presented humanlike things and thinglike people largely as a cause of fear. Some of these hybrids, however, foster a more conflicted reaction. In their treks through the city, living with thoughts repeating like

gramophone records, Rhys's women are enlivened by thoughts of the clothing they have and could have, clothing that (like the paintings that adorn their rooms) has a ghostly half-life. In their loneliness, fear of human contact, and frequent reluctance to take responsibility for their actions, these women often grant a sort of magical agency to their clothing. Aging, down on their luck and running out of money, they are also certain that having just the right dress or hat will make everything better—and if one dress or hat fails to deliver, surely another will. Sasha, reflecting on a disastrous meeting with her boss at a Paris clothing store, remembers thinking that if she had been able to buy and wear the 400-franc dress she had been saving for, she would “never have stammered or been stupid.” Anna reflects that “everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell” (25). Julia tells an incredulous Norah that she has spent her last 600 francs on clothing, so as not to shame the family by appearing in a shabby dress, rather than bringing money for a hotel room. “Cringing and broken” in Paris after returning from her London trip, she repeats “in her mind...like a charm: ‘I’ll have a black dress and hat and very dark grey stockings’” (182). The seeming animation of the clothing comes in part from its closeness to the person who wears it—the fact that she wears it so close to the skin, as Julia thinks: “She thought of new clothes with passion, with voluptuousness. She imagined the feeling of a new dress on her body and the scent of it, and her hands emerging from long black sleeves” (20). Clothing also seems animate because it offers the promise of making a person into someone new—like Sasha in her dress, who would, supposedly, never have stammered or been stupid. They promise to bestow new life on those who wear them, and in this promise they seem to have life of their own.

Certainly, part of the transformation that clothing enacts simply derives from the way clothing often fosters certain assumptions about a person's economic status. When Ethel meets Anna at a prior lodging house, she is captivated by Anna's fur coat (which Anna later pawns to finance her abortion): "I can't think why you stay in a room in Camden Town when you've got a coat like that" (111). Sasha, likewise, is convinced that men are only interested in spending time with her because her fur coat makes her seem wealthy. She mentally gives a revue-style title to her adventures: "The last performance of What's-her-name And Her Boys or It Was All Due to an Old Fur Coat. Positively the last performance" (184–185).

Yet the appeal of clothing goes far beyond the aspiration for wealth. At the turn of the century people began using things to construct or "express" a certain personality—in a sense, using things to make themselves persons. The expression that a dress or hat is "so you" (a phrase that continues to be common) seems to have begun at around this time.¹⁴ "It is my dress," Sasha thinks of the dress she wanted at the Paris clothier, despite the fact that she was never able to buy it (28). When she shops for hats, a saleswoman tells her, "I don't want to insist, but yes—that is your hat" (69).

A similar incident occurs in Elizabeth Bowen's story "Ann Lee's," published in the collection of the same name. A woman, Lulu, goes to an understated, expensive hat shop with a friend to find a gold turban to bring on a trip to Cannes. Ann Lee, the shop owner, dissuades her, and Lulu, though grudging at first, is grateful: "How could Lulu

¹⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the first recorded use of the word "you" as an adjective meaning "expressive of or suited to your taste, personality, etc." in a 1918 letter written by Roger Fry.

ever have imagined herself in a gold turban? In a gold turban, when there were hats like these?" (9). As Ann Lee notes of one of the hats Lulu eventually chooses, "It was so much *her*, to have left it behind would have been a pity" (20). Both of these examples hint at the complexities of a woman's relationship to her clothes: the hats somehow make Lulu and Sasha more "themselves," yet in each case, the hat is not the one the woman would initially have chosen. The hat has the power to reveal something about her that she did not hitherto know about herself. Therefore, the hat seems to have a kind of agency. While one might simply accuse Ann Lee of manipulating her customers to sell hats, the story also emphasizes the shopkeeper's own hatlike qualities. As she comes to greet her customers, "one might almost have believed Ann Lee to be emerging from a bandbox" (5).

The vibrancy of the hats, in Bowen's story, seems to subdue the liveliness of the women. Another guest in the shop, a man who has come to see Ann Lee, considers them "part of the fittings of the shop—customers such as every shop kept two of among the mirrors and the chairs" (16). Another story in Bowen's collection also underlines the vibrancy of clothing. In "Making Arrangements," the wronged husband Hewson sets out to send his wife Margery's dresses to her new address, where she has moved in with a lover; he ends up destroying the dresses. He thinks that "without these dresses the inner Margery, unfostered, would never have become perceptible to the world....All her delightfulness to her friends had been in this expansion of herself into forms and colors." Without intending to do so, Hewson begins to "fall upon" the dresses "and crush and crush and crush them." The dresses seem to "pause" and "shudder" as he tears them, and

he says to himself, looking at the carnage, that Margery has “committed suicide” (183–85).

Rhys offers a sustained examination of the vivacity of the dress in “Illusion,” a short story in her first book, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927). In this story, an unnamed narrator discusses her relationship with the expatriate Miss Bruce, a woman of whom she knows only the “outside”—“the cool, sensible, tidy English outside” (31). After Miss Bruce fails to show up for an appointment, the narrator learns that her friend has suddenly been taken to a hospital and needs clothing for her extended stay. The narrator enters Miss Bruce’s room, noticing a “big, square” wardrobe appropriate for a woman of cool exteriority: “Some strain in her made her value solidity and worth more than grace or fantasies” (32). Yet the wardrobe’s interior yields a succession of surprises: “a glow of colour, a riot of soft silks...a...everything that one did not expect” (32–33, ellipses in original). Beneath the flamboyant evening dresses and carnival costumes lies a box containing a “neat little range of smaller boxes” with names like “Rouge Fascination,” “Rouge Mandarin,” and “Rouge Andalousse” (33). The narrator surmises that she now “kn[ows] it all” about her “gentlemanly” friend—that Miss Bruce is taunted by dresses that speak to her, saying, “Wear me, give me life...and I will do my damndest for you!” (34–35). Miss Bruce, she imagines, takes the dresses and “rouge fascination” home and puts them on, staring in the mirror at a “transformed self” yet never daring to wear the dresses outside of the house. The narrator reluctantly leaves the apartment, knowing that Miss Bruce would be ashamed to learn that her secret had been discovered and overwhelmed with pity for the abandoned dresses:

I imagined them, shrugging their silken shoulders, rustling, whispering about the *anglaise* who had dared to buy them in order to condemn them to life in the dark...The yellow dress appeared malevolent, slouching on its hanger; the black ones were mournful; only the little chintz frock smiled gaily, waiting for the supple body and limbs that should breathe life into it. (35–36)

The way that the dresses seem to exclaim, the pathos of their remaining in the closet, confirms the combined agency of the wearer and the dress. It is necessary for the dresses to be worn for them to be “given life,” but the spark of the dress “transforms” the wearer. In yielding secrets about Miss Bruce, whose own exterior resembles the solid wardrobe, the dresses exteriorize her consciousness, minimizing the difference between a person with interiority and a thing, which is supposedly pure exterior.

If dresses minimize the difference between the garment and its wearer, the use of mannequins—both living and nonliving—to promote them accentuates the hazy boundary between person and thing. Living mannequins or models coexisted with the dummies that the word *mannequins* continues to denote—which, like the Rhys woman herself, were very much creatures of the thirties city. Indeed, Liz Conor suggests that women became far more visible in cities in the twenties and thirties than they had been previously, in part due to the paradoxical tactic of objectifying themselves. She writes that the mannequin—both of the store-window and the live variety—“overcame the lingering stigma associated with women on public display” by becoming a ubiquitous part of the city scene (109). The lifelikeness of the inanimate mannequin provoked fear and fascination, as it has continued to do. There have been many film and television examples of mannequins coming to life, from the 1987 romantic comedy *Mannequin* to episodes of the science-fiction series *The Twilight Zone* and *Doctor Who* detailing the

secret lives of the dummies after the shops close. In Rhys's Paris and London, however, the mannequins were a new phenomenon.

While dressmaker's dummies have existed in some form or another since the seventeenth century, mannequins changed in the interwar period. Unlike the turn-of-the-century wax figures with real hair, eyebrows, moustaches, and other naturalistic touches, the new mannequins were designed to look neither particularly feminine nor strictly realistic. Newly made of metal and sporting slimmer, more androgynous and streamlined figures, mannequins were presented as creatures of the new and of the urban (Gronberg 379). As Nicole Parrot shows in her book *Mannequins*, many of the changes began in the year 1922. It was in this year that mannequins began to be made in other substances than wax, which had made for heavy (about 250-pound) mannequins that were fragile and difficult to display, as shopwindow spotlights could melt them and features such as fingers could easily break. The new mannequins were made of metal, wood, or papier-mâché (67). Also in 1922, some mannequin makers began to base their designs on sketches rather than on human models, valuing "a good line, and purity and unity of colour" over faithful mimetic detail (74, 86). In some cases, mannequins even lacked faces. Yet although the new mannequins were in some ways less realistic than the previous store-window figures, many commented that they seemed more true-to-life. Writing in 1947, a critic wrote, "It is a paradox that you cannot achieve realism by means of the literal reproduction of anything. This paradox explains why the old-fashioned display mannequins with their real hair and glass eyes have no life as compared with modern display figures" (Gorelik 158). Shaped not "by the actual but by the ideal body of

the modern woman” (Schwartz 120), the mannequins encouraged women to identify with and see themselves in them.

Though these changes to mannequins began in the twenties, they were not adopted by most department stores in Britain and the United States until the thirties, as two *Life* magazine articles from 1937 show. The first, from July, offered a “day in the life of Grace, a Saks Fifth Avenue dummy,” from her assembly in the morning to her disassembly at night. The article noted that only two years before, “high-style dress shops in New York used only headless forms in their windows” due to the fear that “heads would detract interest from the clothes” (33).¹⁵ A second and more detailed photo essay in December, titled “*Life* Goes to a Party with Cynthia,” centered on a mannequin created by the artist Lester Gaba. An eccentric socialite, Gaba regularly brought his creation to hair salons and parties as well as to department stores and fashion shows—until one day in 1942, when Cynthia shattered into pieces at the beauty parlor. The article begins with a coy description of a “tall, statuesque blonde” with “brittle charm,” a “familiar figure at chic parties” who “haunts the better department stores” (84). Though the accompanying photographs show Cynthia’s true nature, only the last page of the article states that she is “just a dummy,” showing images of her limbs disassembled and sorted into bags.

The coupling of the revelation of Cynthia’s object status with the dismemberment of her body registers the shock and fear that seemingly innocuous dummies could create. While mannequins became an ordinary part of the city, they never lost their strangeness. The Surrealists in particular had a continuing fascination with the mannequin, along with

¹⁵ The French “high-style” shop Siegel & Stockman used the new style of mannequin as early as 1925 (Bouvet and Durozoi 173).

other humanlike things such as the doll and the automaton.¹⁶ In 1925, *Vogue* featured a Man Ray photograph of a mannequin in place of a real woman on its cover. In his 1924 “Manifesto of Surrealism,” André Bréton offered the “modern mannequin” as an example of the “marvelous.” Bréton and others show the ways in which, Hal Foster claims, the mannequin as “uncanny double” becomes “evermore vital as we are evermore inert” (129).

Yet, for all of their associations with life and vitality, mannequins have also been associated with death and violence—and, frequently, with sexual violence. In 1938, the same year Rhys published *Good Morning, Midnight*, the Surrealists assembled a group exhibition at the Galerie Beaux-Arts featuring sixteen mannequins, each decorated and dressed by a different artist. Like the *Life* magazine article about Cynthia, the press for the exhibition played on the mannequins’ resemblance to real women. Man Ray wrote that “nineteen nude young women were kidnapped from the windows of the Grands Magasins” and “violated” by the Surrealists (qtd. in Kachur 41).¹⁷ Mannequins broached the divide not only between person and thing but also between commerce and art. The “women,” placed underneath street signs, were transformed from advertisements for commodities to commodities themselves—rather than window dressing, they appeared as “streetwalkers.” The exhibition foregrounded the simultaneous uniformity and link to

¹⁶ Surrealist artists made several references to automata in the journal *The Minotaure* (Tiffany 82). Hans Bellmer’s best-known work was a series of photographs of a mechanical doll he had designed and built, showing her limbs arranged in disjointed poses that suggested both violence and sexuality.

¹⁷ The fascinating similarity of the mannequins to actual women led *Elle Italia*, in October 2009, to print a fashion spread photographed by Karl Lagerfeld recreating several of the Surrealist mannequin assemblages using live models (Singleton, Zanoletti).

individuality of the mannequins: like the major department stores, the artists worked with identical mannequins, using clothing and props to differentiate them. The most famous of the mannequins, André Masson's, pointed to the mannequin's conflation of life, death, and the erotic. A dummy gagged with a pansy with her head in a cage, with peacock feathers surrounding her genital area, the assemblage suggested life and efflorescence as well as sexual promiscuity and violence.

Rhys also links mannequins to promiscuity, prostitution, and violence, emphasizing the way these eerie doubles unnerve her lonely women characters. Shopwindow mannequins are a familiar sight to Sasha from her days working for a clothing store in her earlier stay in Paris. She remembers spending her days watching the "charming and malicious oval faces" of the "three or four elongated dolls," "thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, reluctant eyes, sawdust heart—all complete" (17–18). Despite Sasha's distaste for the mannequins, she covets the clothing they display. Moreover, her job requires her to be barely more human and adaptable than they are: "There was no lift in the shop. That's why I was there." Sasha is a hostess, taking a job that requires her to "mark [her] mind vacant, neutral" (18). Eventually, she is fired for her nervous chattering.

Sasha's repeated comparisons of mannequins to dolls highlight the shifting and frequently vexed relationships women have with the dummies. Girls often consider dolls to be, alternately, confidantes, surrogate children, and mirrors of themselves; they also, frequently, destroy or mutilate dolls in order to vent anger, or just to see how they work or what is inside their plastic casing. In *Smile Please*, Rhys describes memories of

“smashing” the face of a doll she had received as a gift when she was younger, because her sister had been given a prettier doll. Rhys found a stone and “brought it down with all [her] force upon her face and heard the smashing sound with delight.” Talking to her great aunt afterward, young Rhys finally wept for the doll, promising to “bury her in the garden” and “put flowers on her grave” (32).¹⁸ Rhys’s female characters have similarly conflicting feelings about the mannequins they observe.

Like Sasha, other Rhys heroines are avid window shoppers, wanting at once to emulate and destroy the mannequins in the displays. Anna Morgan notes that the mannequins in the display windows “sneer” and “smile” in her face (25). She mentally ridicules the women on the street with clothes like “caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows,” noting their eyes “fixed on the future”—similar, perhaps, to the fixed gazes of the store window mannequins. Yet Anna is not immune to the desire to emulate what Sasha refers to as “the damned dolls.” Looking at a black velvet dress on a mannequin in a shop window, Anna thinks that “a girl could look lovely in that, like a doll or a flower” (130). After Walter gives her money for the first time, Anna immediately buys the full outfit worn by the mannequin in the window and notes that the saleswomen dress her in it “as if I were a doll” (28).

¹⁸ Rhys’s description of the destruction of the doll is similar to Claudia’s explanation of her desire to dismember the white, blue-eyed dolls she would receive as gifts in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*: “I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around... To discover what had eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved in others” (20–22). Claudia’s fascination with the *inside* of the doll—its secret, the thing within or beyond or underneath the tiny fingers and curly hair—calls attention to the uncertain difference between people and things, the way in which it is difficult not to ascribe some sort of interiority to objects, particularly when they take a human shape.

If Anna as a shopper resembles a doll, living mannequins (or, as they are now known, models) are even closer to the “damned dolls” that Sasha watches. A recognizable urban type in the 1910s through the 1930s, the mannequin was somewhat different from the contemporary fashion model: though mannequins took part in fashion shows, they were also typically regular employees at particular clothiers’ or department stores. Caroline Evans describes the job of a “girl-mannequin”: While she was mostly expected to remain silent, she could answer guests’ questions about prices or clothing manufacturers (Evans, “Jean” 247). The mannequin could be considered both a subject, with her “style, confidence, panache,” and an object, as her hours standing still for a dresser and couturier showed (258). Like the store-window dummy, the girl-mannequin could pose a threat to individuality, as she “embodied the contradiction between the multiple and the one-off” (255), part of a parade of models—and of a show which would be repeated multiple times for multiple audiences—yet offering the promise of an individual style to the watching consumer. Body types of female models also became more standardized; the new 1920s models were androgynous, athletic and “modern,” as first American and then British and French stores and designers began employing young women with the flapper body type (245).

Critics at the time often seized on the uniformity of girls who worked as mannequins and as chorus girls. In the 1927 essay “The Mass Ornament,” Siegfried Kracauer wrote of the transformation of the English “Tiller Girls” (a troupe of chorus girls) from “individual” young women into “indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics” (“Mass” 405). The transformation, he writes, is akin

to the “capitalist production process” of the assembly line (406). In a second essay published in 1931, Kracauer described an American chorus-girl troupe as “not really sixteen girls” because “every girl’s leg is one thirty-secondth of a precise apparatus...they correspond—to the ideal of the machine” (566). This incorporation of multiple women into a single “apparatus” calls to mind the thirties films of Busby Berkeley, in which dancing or swimming women form shapes and symbols.

Mannequins were valued not as individuals but rather as part of a group—even though the mannequins were often presented to appeal to consumers’ desire to establish an individual personality. Evans notes the uncanny effect that is achieved when several human models appear on the runway or in the department store, showing that “fashion, supposedly about individuality, is actually about uniformity” (*Fashion* 172). The same tension between individuality and uniformity applied to the inanimate mannequin. Hillel Schwartz notes that “dummies embody the contradictions of the process by which modern societies dehumanize the labor whose products they extol, then celebrate the ‘made to measure’ individuality that factory labor and mass-produced objects made possible” (113). As Evans writes, the inanimate mannequin, in relation to the actual woman, is “both a doll, uncannily posed against her human, and a double...simultaneously a reassurance against the threat of death and annihilation and a terrifying challenge to human individuality” (175). The prominence of the mannequin in the twenties and thirties was closely connected to the popularization of ready-to-wear, standardized clothing. Ready-to-wear clothing first became truly popular for women in the 1920s, facilitating the creation of identical dresses that could be worn by many

different women, but reducing the cost of clothing so that women had more ability to customize their wardrobe to their own “personalities” (Worth 27).

In the early story “Mannequin,” Rhys describes a group of female models, each chosen for her type: there is the gamine, the *blonde enfante*, the *femme fatale*, the androgyne, the “cat whom men would and did adore,” and the star, a “frankly ugly woman” whose slim hips and “chic of the devil” nevertheless earn her a commanding salary (*LB* 64). Not only are the girls separated into types, but also their individual limbs are distinguished and valued separately. Anna, the focalizer of the story, has been chosen as the *jeune fille* and owes her job, specifically, to her legs; her arms are “pathetically thin” (59). The mannequins all act in manners appropriate to their *genre*, even while on lunch break; the “*sportive*” girl cheekily smokes under the disapproving eye of Mme Pecard and the “haughty” girl sits aloof from the others. Through the use of these established types of women, the fashion houses promise a spurious individuality.

The mannequins, rigidly separated by type, present a microcosm of the store’s social economy, which is itself a microcosm of the wider world. The shop features other female worker types, each with its own specific task: the working girls, who have the “stamp of labour on them” (65), the saleswomen, and the “helpful and shapeless” dresser Mme Pecard (61). Among these varying “genres” of women are the buyers, each of whom embodies a distinct national type: the “notoriously timid” English, the more demanding and brusque Americans, and the elegant, well-heeled South Americans (62). The bustling of the types, the functioning of the machine, originally fatigues and oppresses Anna but, by the end of the day, she feels that she “belongs” (69). The final

paragraph of the story widens the lens from Anna and her cohort to mannequins in similar shops throughout the city: “All up the street the mannequins were coming out of the shops, pausing on the pavements a moment, making them as gay and as beautiful as beds of flowers before they walked swiftly away and the Paris night swallowed them up” (70).

This ending reinforces the uncanny quality of the mannequins. Standing motionless on the sidewalks, they are a part of the city landscape, their resemblance to one another and to flowers making them not quite persons, not quite things. The comparison of beautiful women to flowers is, of course, traditional, but it is one which Rhys frequently applies to (human) mannequins. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha observes that the English mannequin at the clothing store where she works is “*belle comme une fleur de verre*” while the French mannequin is “*belle comme une fleur de terre*” (23). These “flowers” model the same dresses as the “damned dolls” in the window and have the same kind of almost-life. Flowers regularly appear in Rhys’s fiction as ghostly presences stranded between life and death, similar to the trees she presents as partly alive, partly inanimate. Julia, for example, is struck by the appearance of a vase of tulips: “some were very erect, stiff, virginal, rather prim. Some were dying, with curved grace in death” (*ALMM* 116).

The ending of “Mannequin” also offers a pessimistic assessment of the girls’ ultimate disposability, despite the hyper-specialized roles or identities each is given and the matching clothing each is asked to model. Though Anna quickly becomes inured to her role in this system, the presence of all the other girls at the end of the story, girls from

other shops who might also have been hired to be the “*jeune fille*” with lovely legs, suggests that she will eventually be replaced by another mannequin—as will they all, as they age and change. As one mannequin who worked for the house of British designer Edward Molyneux put it, models in the interwar period “had little social standing” (qtd. in Craik 75). The job of mannequin did offer young women some newfound mobility and earning power. Popular representations of mannequins emphasized both the shabbiness of the women’s lives and the fantasy endings that they might have: a 1926 Fannie Hurst novel and a 1937 Joan Crawford vehicle, both titled *Mannequin* after the occupation of the main character, featured romances between the models and upper-class men. As Rhys’s works underline, such developments were uncommon, and mannequins could not depend on even the small paychecks they received for long.¹⁹ Rhys’s older female characters all remember working as mannequins or painters’ models (or both), but this part of their lives is in the past. Yet they still, like Cynthia, haunt the department stores, pining for the dresses that the mannequins model.

While mannequins are a central example of an occupation or role that requires a person to become more like a thing, other examples also pepper Rhys’s works. In a scene in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia recalls identifying with the woman pictured in a reproduction of a Modigliani painting, describing the woman’s “sort of proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a mask...but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman...I felt as if the woman in

¹⁹ Reviewing her limited prospects, Anna thinks to herself, “What about what’s-her-name? She got on, didn’t she? ‘Chorus-Girl Marries Peer’s Son’” (*VD* 74). Of course, most chorus girls (and mannequins) were not so lucky.

the picture were laughing at me and saying: ‘I am more real than you. But at the same time I *am* you. I’m all that matters of you’” (53). Julia’s apprehensions about the Modigliani painting acquire a new dimension when readers discover where she was looking at the painting, and what she was doing at the time: working as a painter’s model. As Julia well knows, the woman in the painting was, most likely, painted from a real live woman, and her own image will be transformed into a painting. This tension between being a body that must keep still and serve the painter’s vision and a person who twitches and reacts and thinks is reflected in the title *The Laughing Torso*, the 1932 memoirs of the artist and former sculptor’s model Nina Hamnett. Like Hamnett, Julia is both a subject that can laugh and an object, a torso or body. Mannequins also experience this consciousness of being both a subject and an object.

Conclusion: Things and Otherness in the Thirties City

Rhys’s mannequins and ex-mannequins are not the only people who exhibit themselves—their bodies, their stories—for the spectatorship of others. Forms of the word *exhibit* appear frequently in her novels, especially in *Good Morning, Midnight*. While Sasha’s inheritance leaves her exempt from worrying about financial support from others (and she pledges not to “grimace and posture before these people any longer”), this development subjects her to “exhibitions” from others who want her money (153). A painter named Serge invites her to his flat to see his paintings—a literal art exhibition—but once she agrees to pay for one of his paintings their relationship comes to an end, and Sasha is disappointed to learn of its mercantile nature. She also attracts the solicitations of René, a young man whose merchandise (apparently) is himself: “He isn’t trying to size

me up, as they usually do—he is exhibiting himself, his own person” (72). René’s personal stories, she thinks, have been invented to amuse her. Though Sasha no longer has René’s need to “exhibit herself,” she makes note of the ways he markets his body and talents, thinking of a spoon trick he shows her as a way to increase her “amusement value” (158). These exhibitions attempt to establish a person’s singularity, but the novels suggest that such insistence on personal distinction is an illusion. When Sasha protests that she is not like other women, René responds, “Yes, but all women say that, too” (161).

The chief exhibit in *Good Morning, Midnight*, however, is not Sasha or René but the Exposition des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, which Sasha (who refers to it as the Exhibition) thinks of frequently.²⁰ In her dream in which the steel hand points to a sign for the exposition, she thinks that she “does not want to see the Exhibition—I want the way out” (13). However, she later goes to see it twice—including once with René, near the end of the novel. The two of them remark on the Monument de la Paix, the one exhibit not associated with a particular nation. A small tower displaying the flags of the forty-two participating nations, the peace monument was dwarfed by the more nationalistic monuments surrounding it and mocked in the papers for being “truncated” and “spindly” (qtd. in Herbert 31). René calls it “vulgar” and “*mesquin*” (meager). Sasha half-heartedly defends it, saying in a “school-mistress’s voice” that the “building is very fine” (164).

²⁰ See Britzolakis for a detailed account of all of the references to the Exhibition.

As I suggested earlier, the exposition was remembered not for promoting world peace but for highlighting international tensions. The Spanish Civil War was ongoing and another war threatened to happen soon. As in her dream, Sasha links the exposition to a sinister hybrid body, part human and part machine. Shortly after seeing the monuments, René and Sasha return to her hotel room, where they have a violent sexual encounter on the bed. He leaves her with the “damned room grinning at” her—the same room that “spoke” to her at the beginning of the novel. Alone, Sasha imagines that “all that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel” with numerous arms, at the end of each of which is “an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara [...] But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me... And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and of song like this: ‘Hotcha—hotcha—hotcha’” (187, some ellipses in original).

This cryptic image has been interpreted in multiple ways: as a “condemnation of feminized mass culture” (Garrity 61), a “parody of masculine futurism” (Konzett 186), an example of urban spectatorship that both watches and is made up in order to be seen (Bowlby 53). It is also worth noting that the image is associated with the exhibition. While the image registers Sasha’s terror after her failed sexual encounter, it also reveals her anxiety about the social climate—a condition reinforced by the “grey sky” in the background. The image puts the previous images of synthetic arms, false teeth, repeating gramophone-record thoughts, and store-window mannequins in a more alarming light, expressing the fear that Europe is heading toward a sinister, inhuman future.

Rhys’s “test cases” of entities that seem somewhere in between the person and the thing are part of a long tradition of cultural fascination with statues, dummies, and

corpses that continues today. However, Rhys's use of these images had a particular meaning in the thirties. Her idea that people are as resistant to interpretation as trees or statues voices the fear that people are so different from one another that no understanding or empathy is possible. However, this idea coexists in Rhys's work with the fear that all people, including her protagonists, are reproductions, not so different from each other at all. The uncanny moments of hesitation and panic, in which people cannot tell if an entity is animate or inanimate, point to a broader sense that ways of categorizing people and things were becoming increasingly unstable—and, perhaps, were never very stable or sufficient to begin with. As the next chapter will show, Evelyn Waugh's thirties works articulate this same anxiety.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVELYN WAUGH'S "DUBIOUS CLUTTER" OF PEOPLE AND THINGS

As I've shown in the previous chapters, several writers of the thirties often represented material things that seem to escape human control. For Christopher Isherwood, the kitschy things in Frl. Schroeder's lodging house are so alien they seem like they could never be destroyed, a condition that makes them both fearsome and appealing. Jean Rhys focuses on the intractability of both inanimate objects and human strangers, whose very bodies seem to convey hostility. Similarly, Evelyn Waugh's novels of the thirties and late twenties are shaped by the tension between the human desire for order and the things and people who escape that control.

Waugh critics of the past several decades continually return to a familiar opposition in his works: that between chaos and order. Robert Garnett argues that Waugh's early work is notable for its "elemental mythic patterns and tensions beneath the random, cluttered surface of life" (26). Ann Pasternak Slater suggests that Waugh "rummages in the smoking rubbish-heap of experience and seizes upon its grimy *trouvailles*" ("Waffle" 98). Slater argues that, despite their appearance of anarchy, Waugh's novels are highly structured and dramatize an attempt to order and organize a disorderly world. His works are filled, as a title of one of her essays puts it, with "Right Things in Wrong Places." For Naomi Milthorpe, "The materials of raw experience, the

‘amorphous, haphazard’ conditions of life, are in his novels shaped into patterns that impose meaning and order on the chaos of modern experience” (28). Many of these critics suggest that Waugh used his newfound Catholic faith as a source for order in his work, as in his life. Waugh converted to Catholicism in 1930, but rarely made explicit reference to the Church in his fictional works until *Brideshead Revisited* (1945); however, many readers look for signs of a Catholic mentality in the earlier novels. David Wykes, for example, argues that Waugh envisioned “the artist as the creator in the secular sphere of the kind of order and consistency that the Church had established on earth” (85).¹

Though Garnett, Slater, and Wykes (among others) all refer to a “random, cluttered surface” or a “smoking rubbish-heap of experience” in Waugh’s work, they ultimately focus on the order or pattern hiding underneath the clutter. I argue that Waugh’s voluminous descriptions of “rubbish” or “clutter”—a clutter that often takes a literal, material form—should not simply be dismissed. Waugh’s interwar fictional works, from *Decline and Fall* (1928) to his four novels of the thirties, are mostly farces filled with odd juxtapositions, instances of mistaken identity, and jumbles of odd things. Like Isherwood, Waugh focuses on things that seem recalcitrantly material: fleshy bodies, ugly and heavy knickknacks, things with no apparent function that seem out-of-place no matter where they are. These items are, to return to a distinction I have made

¹ See also Alan Dale, who sees Waugh’s works in the tradition of medieval satire, which was “grounded in a communal faith in a divinely ordered creation.” Dale argues that modern irony shows a “loss of consensus as to the ordering of the universe,” while Waugh shows “absolute faith in traditional Christian revelation” (112).

before, not objects but *things*, resistant to human attempts to define them by a particular function or symbolic significance. While it is true that Waugh's works often present a yearning for order in a disorderly world, it is also true that the material things Waugh depicts—from human bodies to gramophones—have a tendency to subvert attempts to control them. Rather than simply searching for a pattern that lends structure to these multifarious things, we should also ask what these things are and what function they have.

In this chapter, I argue that Waugh's early works frequently highlight the impossibility of ordering or classifying people or things, of making sense out of chaos. I begin by discussing a variety of systems of categorization highlighted in his works, and the ultimate breakdown of that order. Waugh's novels refer to archaeologists, collectors, and customs officials, all of whom attempt to classify objects and persons according to their own particular schema. Yet their classifications are often faulty, resulting in more chaos. Waugh himself organizes miscellaneous things into very long lists that emphasize disorder rather than structure. Next, I call attention to the prevalence of travel and mobility in Waugh's works, and the way this mobility disrupts attempts to give things or persons a stable meaning or function. Waugh's characters bring possessions from one continent to the next, often encouraging us to see familiar things in a new way. Waugh is especially fond of depositing British people and things among non-Western, supposedly primitive cultures and places, and of transferring these so-called primitive people and things to Britain—a move that frequently dislocates these people and things from usual ways of thinking about them. Finally, I argue that Waugh does not even settle the issue of

what makes a person different from a thing. Instead, he (like Jean Rhys) often troubles the distinction between people and things, emphasizing people's bodies and similarity to machines. I draw on the comic theories of Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis to explore the effect of this confusion between persons and things on Waugh's tone, arguing that it results in dark comedy that leaves readers suspended between detachment and empathy.

In previous chapters, I have linked thirties writers' fascination with things to the social and political instability they observed around them. For Christopher Isherwood, things provide an alternative to competing political ideologies and a source of solace in the face of a coming destructive war, even as they allow Isherwood to ironically distance himself from them and from the historical situation. For Jean Rhys, the difficulty of distinguishing people from things in the interwar city highlights her protagonists' fears that they are reproductions rather than unique individuals. This confusion between people and things also allows her characters to work out their relationships to other people who seem both different and hostile to them, in a place and time in which identity categories such as nationality seem increasingly unstable and yet as divisive as ever.

Waugh's representation of people and things in a state of disorder also ties into a set of anxieties particular to his social and historical context. His treatment of things flowing back and forth between supposedly modern Britain and the "primitive" world reflects a widespread fear that modernity was leading to cultural regress rather than progress, and that European moderns would soon be as "uncivilized" as they considered people from these places. I draw on the work of Michael Taussig to explore the common linkage, in the interwar period, between "primitive" culture and the seeming magic of the

most modern technologies. Waugh's works feature fictional African countries torn apart by wars, dispersing things and people to unexpected places and reinforcing the suggestion that modern Britain was headed toward both conflict and cultural decline.

Additionally, while I think that many critics have missed opportunities to explore Waugh's obsession with "clutter" or "rubbish," Garnett and Slater have a point when they link his fixation on chaos and order to his conflicted and often negative thoughts about modernity. They suggest that Waugh emphasizes the clutter of the modern world in order to express the wish that people and things be granted a steady, stable value, purpose, and identity, as they had in the past. Douglas Patey and Michael Gorra make similar points about Waugh's frequent treatment of people as things, suggesting that he does this to criticize a modern culture that fails to acknowledge people's identity and agency—or what one might consider their souls. I agree that Waugh perceived British culture in the thirties to be unstable and violent. I also argue, following Jonathan Greenberg and Lisa Colletta, that Waugh's satirical tone makes it impossible to pin down any set of stable beliefs underlying his comic scenarios. As a result, the novels offer several interpretations of relationships between people and things without endorsing one in particular. Though some critics suggest that the disorganized world of his interwar satires articulates a disdain for the modern world and a desire to return to a more orderly past society, I argue that they frequently express doubt that any classification scheme is valid or sufficient. They depict a modern society filled with chaos and debris, in which people are barely distinguishable from things, but they also express doubts that human society has ever been anything *but* chaotic.

Waugh's Promiscuous Collections

In suggesting that Waugh's works are characterized by the order or pattern lurking underneath the chaos, Slater, Garnett, and Patey advocate a view that Waugh himself expressed. Waugh once said that "story-telling" was the "attempt to reduce to order the anarchic raw materials of life...the artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little systems of order of his own" (qtd. in Davis 16). An avid collector of books and artworks, Waugh placed a high premium on the correct classification of things—on distinguishing "good" art from "bad" art, "fake" artifacts from real ones.

Waugh was very concerned, from a young age, with books as physical objects. Before he became a writer, he was interested in pursuing a career in illumination or printing; one of his editors, Frank Hermann, remembered the special limited editions using expensive materials he had made of all his books, for himself, friends, and collectors (Ker 151, Hermann 6). In a letter to his daughter, Teresa, on her sixth birthday, he instructed her to take care of the high-quality paintbrushes he had given her: "When a thing is the best of its kind, even if it is only a little thing like a paint brush, it should be treated like a Sacred Animal. Always remember it is not the size or the price of things that is valuable but the quality" (*L* 180). He wrote even of the contents of a book in physical terms, telling Nancy Mitford that "a tailor or bootmaker would not waste materials. Words are our materials" (*L* 184). To an interviewer asking about the connection between his work and his life, Waugh said that each of his novels was meant

to be “a pleasant object. I think any work of art is something exterior to oneself, it is the making of something, whether it is a bed-table or a book” (qtd. in Leys 169).

Despite this personal belief in the importance of the well-crafted aesthetic object, Waugh’s humor frequently revolves around the inability to distinguish the real from the fake, the beautiful from the kitschy. Waugh may, in life, have sometimes acted as a moral or aesthetic absolutist, but his works express skepticism about the possibility of making any such judgment. Many of his novels suggest that those who do attempt to create “little systems of order”—even specialists, such as collectors or anthropologists—engage in a fruitless attempt to order and organize the world. Waugh lingers on scenes in which people hesitate over whether a particular specimen falls in one category or another. Waugh’s frequent long lists seem to structure collections of objects by enumerating them and placing them in parallel positions, but since these lists include many puzzling, ill-fitting items and sometimes stretch to multiple pages, they highlight chaos and excess rather than order.

This use of the list to emphasize disorder and chaos is common in interwar literature, as several critics have noted. As Patti White explains in *Gatsby’s Party*, lists may “initially seem the very embodiment of order” but “have a tendency to tip toward a subversion of the symbolic” (72). In a survey of lists through time, Umberto Eco argues that the “classical” list shows the “outline of a possible order, the desire to give things a form,” while the modern list tends increasingly to “chaotic enumeration, where we delight in introducing the absolutely heterogeneous” (245, 254). Eco offers James Joyce as a paradigmatic example of a writer who employs the modern chaotic list. The “Ithaca”

episode of *Ulysses*, for example, offers neatly structured lists and a question-and-answer format, inviting readers to interpret the information—yet the information produced is so copious that no reader could hope to make sense of (or even take notice of) all of it.

Waugh also plays on this tension between order and chaos, tying it more specifically to a world that seems always on the brink of war, savagery, and the dissolution of cultural differences.

He satirizes those people who attempt to “give things a form.” His novel *Black Mischief* (1932) is set in Azania, a fictional African nation. Azania is ruled by an emperor named Seth, a native of the country educated at Oxford and enamored of the ways of the West. Seth sets up a “Ministry of Modernisation” to make his nation more “advanced” and hires an intelligent young British rogue, the recurring Waugh character Basil Seal, to run the ministry. One of Seth’s many directives is for a museum with an “anthropological and historical section” featuring “examples of native craft” and the “relics of the Royal House” as well as sections with examples of characteristic flora and fauna (196–97). Seth recognizes this initiative as a key part of modernizing and civilizing the wild nation of Azania, occupied by numerous warring tribes as well as a smattering of Europeans who have come to the country after failing in professional and romantic pursuits in their homelands. His effort, however, is doomed. The Ministry of Modernisation is soon “completely paralysed by the hawkers of all races” offering items such as “homely household deities, tanned human scalps,” “amulets to ward off the evil eye from camels,” and a “vast monolithic phallus borne by three oxen from a shrine in the interior.” Seth’s scheming representative Mr. Youkomian, who takes upon himself the task of buying the

items (then selling them back to himself at a profit as the head of the museum acquisitions division) “bought and resold, haggled, flattered and depreciated, and ate and slept in a clutter of dubious antiques” (199). The museum never opens, and the project results in profiteering and piles of unclassifiable things.

In his quest for acquisitions, Youkomian often does business with the Viscount Boaz, a man whose name recalls that of the early anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas influenced a major change in museum display in the late nineteenth century, advocating a shift from organizing ethnological objects by form or type to organizing them by social context, showing them in “group displays” to promote a better understanding of how a culture used them.² No such displays are made for the Azanian museum, and the antiques remain piles of clutter. Yet while the “antiques” may not have the value that Youkomian claims they do, their multifariousness allows Waugh to comically exploit their material particulars. The things attain value not for their meaning or function but for their strange appearance and incongruity.

Waugh often suggests that seemingly organized spaces like museums are actually bastions of undifferentiated clutter. In *A Handful of Dust* (1934), he also skewers supposed experts, including the archaeologist Reggie St. Cloud. Reggie has an estate filled with “fragmentary amphoras, corroded bronze axe-heads, little splinters of bone and charred stick, a Greco-Roman head in marble, its features obliterated and ground smooth with time” (141). Despite Reggie’s claim to an occupation associated with knowledge and discovery, his home has objects of various times and places rubbing

² Bill Brown discusses Boas and this shift in museum classification in *A Sense of Things*, pp. 92–112.

against each other, contrary to their original settings and functions, with no clear principle of organization. Waugh suggests that the identity and value of these items, too, are dubious.

In lampooning Seth's planned Azanian museum and Reggie's archaeological finds, Waugh critiques not only supposed experts but also the presumed authenticity of old or "primitive" things like axe-heads or amulets. In *Scoop*, the journalist and collector Corker, en route to the wartorn African nation of Ishmaelia, purchases "Japanese shawls and a set of Benares trays; he had also acquired a number of cigar boxes, an amber necklace and a model of Tutankhamen's sarcophagus during his few hours in Cairo; his bedroom at the hotel was an emporium of Oriental Art" (99). Corker describes his plans to transfer these finds to his London domicile, thereby making his home more distinctive: "The missus won't know the old home when I've finished with it" (99). Once in Africa, Corker purchases a "curio"—an elephant figurine of synthetic ivory. One would think that, in Africa, a person could purchase an elephant figurine made of *genuine* ivory; as it is, Corker's elephant knickknack is composed of the same material as the bell on the London desk of his publisher, Lord Copper (55). A collection of dubious credibility, Corker's finds nonetheless exemplify the fad for Eastern goods, mass reproduced and driven by the tourist trade yet presented to the tourist as authentic, singular items. Waugh is skeptical of this trend, but presents Corker's finds as a source of amusement.

Waugh's characters are highly mobile, as much of his humor stems from the movement of people and things from one continent to another. Their transience allows them to bring together a wide variety of incongruous things from different places, a

tendency Waugh presents as both comical and lamentable. This traffic in things over national borders leads the things to be used in unfamiliar and absurd ways. In *A Handful of Dust*, a woman by the name of Princess Jenny Abdul Akbar has a London flat in which she has gathered her various finds:

The Princess's single room was furnished promiscuously and with truly Eastern disregard for the right properties of things; swords meant to adorn the state robes of a Moorish caid were swung from the picture rail; mats made for prayer were strewn on the divan; the carpet on the floor had been made in Bokhara as a wall covering; while over the dressing-table was draped a shawl made in Yokahama for sale to cruise-passengers; an octagonal table from Port Said held a Tibetan Buddha of pale soapstone; six ivory elephants from Bombay stood along the top of the radiator. Other cultures, too, were represented by a set of Lalique bottles and powder boxes, a phallic fetish from Senegal, a Dutch copper bowl, a waste-paper basket made of varnished aquatints, a golliwog presented at the gala dinner of a seaside hotel, a dozen or so framed photographs of the Princess, a garden scene ingeniously constructed in pieces of coloured wood, a radio set in fumed oak, Tudor style. In so small a room the effect was distracting. (109–10)

The term *promiscuously*, here, most obviously refers to the disparate appearances and origins of the objects, arranged without care for the “right properties of things”—a phrase which indicates that Waugh or the narrator is advocating a certain aesthetic and perhaps even moral system of values. The collection includes items with religious significance (the fetish, the table with the Buddha image, the prayer mats) in places where they will not, presumably, be used for any sacramental purpose. If any of the items are beautiful, valuable, or meaningful, their casual and cluttered placement will distract from that significance. As Martin Stannard suggests, the collection presents a “chaos of cultural signifiers,” a “jumble of high and low, sacred and profane” (200). The reference to promiscuity applies just as well to Jenny herself, who is constantly flirting with men. The “phallic fetish,” cosmetics, shawl, and photographs of herself give signs of her

untrammelled and narcissistic sexuality.³ Like her possessions, Jenny—whose “Princess” title may be entirely an invention—is of uncertain provenance. Friends ponder whether she is Jewish (85); she tells stories of a previous marriage to a cruel yet handsome Moroccan “Moulay” or prince, whose existence may be fictional (81). In linking disorder with promiscuity, here Waugh suggests that both things and people have a “right” place, and that being out of place is a sign of modern depravity.

Some critics argue that *A Handful of Dust* represents a new phase in Waugh’s development, from earlier farces like *Black Mischief* to a work that mixed comedy and tragedy. The main drama in the book is the divorce between Tony and Brenda Last, precipitated by her affair with another man. In the face of this marital breakup, Tony thinks of the “whole reasonable and decent constitution of things” as “an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object mislaid somewhere on the dressing table” (133). Like the description of Princess Jenny’s collection, Tony’s metaphor links a clutter of objects to a figurative disordering of the social world.

Garnett described the novel as a “system of emblematic oppositions, representing savage modernity in conflict with traditional civilized values, moral chaos ranged against moral order” (100). The “traditional civilized values” in the novel are most clearly represented by Tony, the sole combatant against the moral chaos represented by Princess Jenny and Brenda, his faithless wife. Many of the characters in *A Handful of Dust* are

³ Stannard, who studied Waugh’s original manuscripts, points out that the reference to the princess’s promiscuity was more even more explicit in earlier versions: “Corrections to the MS suggest that [Waugh] struggled with how to express his subject’s libertinage, and in the following quotation, bracketed words represent deletions: ‘The Princess’s single room was [heavy with perfume] [perfumed oriental promiscuity] furnished [with typically eastern] promiscuously [...]’” (199).

aging “bright young things,” reaching their late twenties and early thirties but still obsessed with parties and the latest trends. Though Tony’s wife Brenda is one of these aging bright young people, he is more like a Victorian gentleman. Those who seek order in Waugh’s works often suggest that Tony’s example points to a more coherent society in the past, where people and things had value and a “right place.” Many cluttered, dubious, or disorderly things in the novel, however, are not modern but Victorian.

Tony takes great pride in his ancestral estate, Hetton, pumping nearly all of his money into preserving the place. Over the years, the interiors of Hetton have become a repository of Tony’s mementoes, including a “photographic group of his private school; a cabinet called ‘the Museum,’ filled with the fruits of a dozen desultory hobbies, eggs, butterflies, fossils, coins; his parents, in the leather diptych which had stood by his bed at school; Brenda, eight years ago when he had been trying to get engaged to her” (14). This list of things is, again, one of many in Waugh’s works; though the items in it are less incongruous than the contents of many of Waugh’s other lists, it does point to the confusion of people and things. The list refers simply to “Brenda” and “his parents” in describing photographs of them. That Tony thinks of his cabinet as “the Museum” is also significant; it is filled with certain “desultory” contents, not organized like a museum might be (although it is more orderly than Seth’s “clutter of dubious antiques”).

Tony invests faith in the presumed authenticity of the things on display in Hetton, things that he sees as his connection to the past. When an unwanted guest named John Beaver visits, Tony obligingly shows off the “collections—enamel, ivories, seals, snuff boxes, china, ormolu, cloisomé,” along with the “more remarkable folios in the library,”

“prints of the original buildings, manuscript account books of the old Abbey, travel journals of Tony’s ancestors.” Beaver politely admires the things, but occasionally interrupts to say that he has seen similar items elsewhere. Tony responds, “Yes, I’ve seen it but I think mine is the earlier” (33). Hetton, held in the family for centuries, has “not a glazed brick or encaustic tile that was not dear to Tony’s heart” (12). However, Tony’s beloved Hetton is not nearly as “authentic” as he assumes. Our introduction to Hetton comes from an excerpt of a guide to old English estates, which says that the house was “entirely rebuilt in 1864 and is now devoid of interest,” and that its Gothic style is a sham (12). Tony is not the only one taken in by these “quaint but false” echoes of the past. The club John Beaver frequents, Brat’s, is dependent on the designs of the past for its decoration, boasting an “air of antiquity...derived from its elegant Georgian façade and finely panelled rooms,” which is actually “entirely spurious” (9).⁴

Most homes and furnishings, in Waugh’s novels, are inauthentic; more to the point, it is impossible to tell what is authentic from what is not. Lottie Crump’s hotel in *Vile Bodies* is the home of “a good deal too much furniture...some of it rare, some of it hideous beyond description,” most of it from the 1880s. The items are “massive” and seemingly useless; one appurtenance is “associated in some way with cigars,” and the hotel as a whole is the kind of place in which “one expects to find croquet mallets and

⁴ Critics have often pointed to Waugh’s simultaneous fondness for and mockery of Tony as a sign of his ambivalence toward the Victorian age. As Christine Berberich suggests, Tony’s surname, Last, both implies that he is the “last” of his kind and that he is always coming in “last” (48). Simon Joyce usefully describes the tension in the novel between the “modernist monstrosity” that comes from uncritically accepting the new (typified by Brenda Last and her metropolitan friends) and Tony’s habit of embracing the past, with its dangers of falling for a “commercial motive that seeks to package a quaint but false way of life for a tourist audience” (54–55).

polo sticks in the bathroom” (41). The primary appeal of the things comes from their comic heterogeneity, the way in which they frustrate attempts to make meaning of them and simply insist on existing as time goes on. The item “associated in some way with cigars” is a clear example of Brown’s concept of reobjectification. Originally an object made for a specific purpose, through time it has become a thing, notable only for its strange material qualities. Reobjectification, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, urges a recognition of the “misuse value” of a thing—those qualities of an object that we commonly overlook in its regular use that “become legible, audible, palpable when the object is experienced in whatever time it takes (in whatever time it is) for an object to become another [type of object]” (Brown, “Secret” 3).

As much as Waugh presents the Victorian aesthetic as bulky and cluttered, he takes delight in the absurd indestructibility of these things. The obsolescence of the bulky, impractical furniture at Lottie’s finds its echo in the decaying and thinglike workers and guests of the hotel, where “the servants, like the furniture, are old and have seen aristocratic service,” and many of the patrons are deposed aristocrats (*VB* 41). These characters seem to stay at Lottie’s interminably, always to be found lounging in the parlor, either motionless or caught up in their familiar catchphrases and behaviors. Like the Victorian chairs and the signed photograph of the Kaiser hung in the men’s lavatory, they must be somewhere, and Lottie’s is as fitting a place as any.

A similar assortment of old things appears in John Beaver’s room, in which his father’s old things, “maintained in symmetrical order,” have not been moved in years. Waugh emphasizes their materiality, referring to them as “elaborate,” “indestructible

presents...ivory, brass bound, covered in pigskin, crested and gold-mounted.” The items, “somber and bulky,” are not aesthetically pleasing or part of any coherent design scheme. Their materials—ivory, brass, pigskin—are separated, in Waugh’s description, from the names of the items, which appear later: “racing flasks and hunting flasks, cigar cases, tobacco jars, jockeys, elaborate meerschaum pipes” (*HD* 6).⁵

Things and People on the Move

Though Waugh shows Victorian things to be as chaotic and disorderly as more modern(ist) collections, he does show that the chaos takes new forms in an increasingly mobile modern world. Lottie’s and Tony’s collections stay in one place, changing only through accumulating more dusty mementoes and purposeless things. Other large, cumbersome, ill-fitting assortments of things must travel for hundreds of miles and be transferred from one location to the next and periodically explained and accounted for.

In *Scoop* (1938), the country writer William Boot is accidentally sent to the fictional African country of Ishmaelia as a war correspondent, in place of the metropolitan novelist and travel writer John Courtney Boot. A provincial Englishman who writes *The Daily Beast*’s “Lush Places” column, William has no desire to travel and only agrees to go after being threatened with the loss of his beloved column. He is a

⁵ Waugh also indicated a simultaneous fondness and aversion for a chaotic Victorian aesthetic in his critical writings. In an essay called “Let Us Return to the Nineties, But Not to Oscar Wilde,” Waugh described the “early Victorian tide” of “those glittering bits of shell and seaweed—the coloured glass paper weights, wax fruit, Rex Whistler decorations, paper lace Valentines.” The essay both praises this flotsam as something in which one might “splash gaily” (as Waugh extends the tide metaphor) but also suggests that the things can become “drab and disappointing” (*EAR* 122). The things are, Waugh indicates, not interesting individually, aesthetically, or symbolically, but they may become diverting as a comic hodgepodge.

displaced thing, unwillingly dispatched to an unfamiliar place due to a set of circumstances beyond his control. He brings with him a group of other displaced things, a motley collection designed to help him survive in adverse circumstances:

William had acquired a well-, perhaps rather over-, furnished tent, three months' rations, a collapsible canoe, a jointed flagstaff and Union Jack, a hand-pump and sterilizing plant, an astrolabe, six suits of tropical linen and a sou'wester, a camp operating table and set of surgical instruments, a portable humidior, guaranteed to preserve cigars in condition in the Red Sea, and a Christmas hamper complete with Santa Claus costume and a tripod mistletoe stand, and a cane for whacking snakes. (60)

Due to his inexperience, William has been swindled by a sales associate who insists that all of these things will be useful in the wild. The beginning of the list, with the reference to the “well-, perhaps rather over-, furnished tent” employs understatement to lead us into a chaotic mass of items. Unsurprisingly, the bundle gives William trouble at customs, where the officials marvel at his strange belongings: “It was one of those rare occasions when the humdrum life of the douanier is exalted from the tedious traffic in vegetable silks and subversive literature, to realms of adventure...Not since an Egyptian lady had been caught cosseting an artificial baby stuffed with hashish, had the customs officials of Le Bourquet had such a beano” (73–74).

William has brought his strange assortment of goods because of a misunderstanding with Lord Copper, the publisher of the *Daily Beast*. Lord Copper encourages William to bring the type of “cleft sticks” used for sports like hockey or polo, because a previous reporter assigned to the *Beast* used them to telegraph stories, in the absence of other supplies (56). Though Copper’s tale is meant to be a reminder to travel light and be resourceful, William interprets it to mean that he may need multiple items

that he would not anticipate needing to use. His misinterpretation proves valuable. In a new place, William's seemingly useless things take on new functions. The canoe gives William his first romantic experience, as he and a girl named Kätchen pretend to take it for a ride on the floor of his hotel room. The food in the Christmas hamper helps a starving man on the run survive. And William does indeed use a set of the "cleft sticks" to send his reports to the paper on a malfunctioning telegraph. When William unexpectedly breaks a major story, the sticks become a symbol of his triumph; on his return to England, he is greeted by fans waving similar sticks for him to sign. Unlike Princess Jenny Abdul Akbar's promiscuous collection, William's mismatched things are chiefly a source of comic delight. Rather than pointing to their lack of a stable value or purpose as a symptom of a disorderly society, Waugh celebrates the ingenuity with which the things can take on new meanings and functions. William's strange items are used for purposes other than those for which they were designed.

William's collection provides one example among many of a set of things whose meanings and functions change as they travel across national borders. Waugh's fascination with the movement of things leads him to focus, frequently, on scenes at customs offices, which monitor various odd things and people. Though some restrictions are placed on their movement, these restrictions are themselves haphazard and absurd. The most famous such scene occurs in *Vile Bodies*, which begins on board a ship going from France to England. The nominal protagonist of the novel, Adam Fenwick-Symes, incurs the disapprobation of the customs officials due to the number of books he is carrying, several of which (including a manuscript of his memoirs, an economics

textbook, and a copy of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*) are confiscated as "filth" or "subversive propaganda." The officials become frustrated when their crosschecking of Adam's memoir against their list of accepted and prohibited books does not produce results, concluding, "Particularly against books, the Home Secretary is. If we can't stamp out literature in this country we can at least stop its being brought in from outside" (23).

These references to censorship and book-smuggling would be familiar to an audience acquainted with the bans on and public debate about books such as *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *The Well of Loneliness*. Though Waugh exaggerates the cluelessness of the officials for comic effect, many people did think that censors' decisions were arbitrary. Rachel Potter has characterized censorship of American and British modernism as "by its very nature haphazard and subject to ungovernable individual decisions" (89). Waugh himself wrote an essay in which he seemed to contend that government censorship of books would be acceptable as long as there were clear guidelines about what was acceptable and what was prohibited; however, he wrote a letter to a friend claiming that the editor had severely distorted his position (*EAR* 43). (He did not specify which parts of the article were distorted.) In *Vile Bodies*, the customs officials are laughably inefficient, not only mischaracterizing Adam's memoir as salacious literature but also "stripping to the skin" the flighty socialite Agatha Runcible, whom they mistake for a jewel smuggler—a possible fate that William Bradshaw mentions to Arthur Norris in Isherwood's *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. Yet their mistakes are, perhaps, inevitable, stemming from an overly reductive, systematized way of looking at material things, classifying them only as "acceptable" and "unacceptable." The

customs office in *Vile Bodies* offers many examples of things that simply will not fit any classification scheme. Adam notes the strange décor, marveling at “walls...lined with contraband pornography and strange instruments, whose purpose Adam could not guess” (25). As the reference to seemingly purposeless items like these “strange instruments” makes clear, Waugh considers the items not as objects, or material entities with a clear function and purpose, but as more mysterious things, less conformable to human intentions.

As a travel writer, Waugh took a personal interest in the movement of people and things to new and unfamiliar places. He often alternated writing his novels with such “exotic” settings as Brazil and Africa with writing nonfiction narratives about his journeys to these same places. Indeed, the thirties has sometimes been called the golden age of travel writing (Thacker 193). Elizabeth Bowen considered “elsewhereness”—or the desire to be elsewhere—a major trait of her generation (371).

Writers often tied this restlessness to the perceived instability of their time and culture. In *Journey Without Maps* (1936), Graham Greene gives this explanation for his travels in Liberia:

Today our world seems peculiarly susceptible to brutality... We...are living after a war and a revolution, and these half-castes fighting with bombs between the cliffs...seem more likely than we to be aware of Proteus rising from the sea. It is not, of course, that one wishes to stay for ever at that level, but when one sees to what unhappiness, to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebration have brought us, one sometimes has a curiosity to discover if one can from what we have come, to recall at which point we went astray. (21)

Traveling through space, for Greene and others, became a way of traveling through time, of finding what British or European culture had been in the past—and could be again.

Many of Waugh's characters, like Greene, go abroad to seek answers. After his divorce, Tony impulsively takes a trip to the hinterlands of Brazil to find a magical, gothic city. Basil Seal goes to Azania to have a taste of "barbarism." However, the places they find, dotted with Western things, motley groups of exiles from various nations (most of whom have ventured abroad due to a failure to succeed back home), and impenetrable native superstitions, do not yield the dramatic insights they are looking for. Though Waugh presents tribal areas of Africa and South America as frighteningly (and humorously) primitive, the constant travel of people and things across borders makes the distinctions between Britain and the "uncivilized" world difficult to discern.

As I suggested, the movement of things leads them to be used in new ways. In *Scoop* and *Black Mischief*, Waugh wrings humor out of the African "misuse" of Western things by placing Western innovations like wireless sets and even false noses in a jungle setting, emphasizing overlooked aspects of these items. Perhaps the most notable example of this reobjectification in the jungle is a scene in *Black Mischief* detailing the fallout from one of the emperor Seth's many well-intentioned attempts to Westernize his people. Given a full supply of boots so as to appear more modern and no longer need to fight barefoot, his 1,200-member army celebrates the coming of the footwear with a daylong celebration involving singing, dancing, and drumming—after which they eat the boots (180–181). This misunderstanding calls us to look at the boots in a new way, focusing on the material of the objects (the toughness and indigestibility of the boots, for example) rather than the function for which they are typically used, much in the way that the scene in *The Gold Rush* in which Charlie Chaplin's starving tramp eats a boot does.

In making an object like a boot, usually worn as clothing, into a different kind of object, Waugh makes everyday items more thinglike and strange. He dislocates them from usual ways of categorizing, using, and thinking about them.

Michael Taussig, in *Mimesis and Alterity*, shows how the transporting of things makes them arrestingly—and sometimes comically—strange. He argues that the frequent coupling of so-called primitives with modern technologies brings out the way that technology “primitivizes” us all, by reintroducing us to the idea that magic is at work in our modern, rational world. He particularly notes this process at work in the twenties and thirties, in which there were many representations of gramophones (or “talking machines”) being introduced to “primitive” locations or people:

To take the talking machine to the jungle is to emphasize and embellish the genuine mystery and accomplishment of mechanical reproduction in an age when technology itself, after the flurry of excitement at a new breakthrough, is seen not as mystique nor as poetry but as routine...it is to reinstall the mimetic faculty as mystery...in the art of mechanical reproduction, reinvigorating the primitivism implicit in technology's wildest dreams. (208)

As Taussig suggests, Westerners have long been fascinated not only by exotic things, but also by the reactions of supposed primitives to modern things—reactions that can remind us of just how strange and magical certain technologies are. He links this idea to Walter Benjamin's analysis of what he called the “revolutionary energies of the ‘outmoded’”—or how the Surrealists called attention to promising but now superseded fashions and technologies of yesteryear in a way that activated both wonder and pathos (231). In the years in which Waugh was writing, the expansion of travel and new technologies inspired many representations of familiar “modern” things brought to unfamiliar, “unmodern” locales. Films such as *Nanook of the North* and several of the *Tarzan* films dramatized

the encounter of the amazed “uncivilized” person with new technologies such as the gramophone. While such representations regularly trivialize the “primitive” person in showing his or her wonder at the unfamiliar objects, they also unsettle conceptions of Western rationality and superiority. Given this close association of modernity or modernism with the primitive, of the new with the old, some of the most “modern” technologies were commonly linked to cultural regression. Rachel Moore has shown that early film theorists dwelled often on the idea (and fear) that the moving or talking picture brought back a “primitive” relationship with the world and with nature, as critics described cinematic spectatorship “in terms of a credulous spectator’s encounter with an image” (20). Waugh often connects film and “primitive” culture, as he does in “The Balance,” a short story in the form of a silent film (complete with intertitles and interruptions from audience members) which juxtaposes the suicide of the lovelorn socialite Adam Doure with images of a tribal man in a jungle dragging himself to the river to die alone.⁶

Modernism was, of course, deeply intertwined with ideas about the “primitive”—construed both positively and negatively—from the influence of African masks on Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* to the popular characterization of jazz as “jungle music.” Sieglinde Lemke writes that these ideas of the primitive are foundational to early-twentieth-century writing and art, arguing that “wittingly or unwittingly, Euro-American modernism has always been hyphenated, has always been hybrid, has always been biracial” (9). Not only were African and other “primitive” influences noticeable in

⁶ See George McCartney’s *Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition*, pp. 127–35, for further examples of the close association of film and the primitive in Waugh’s work.

modern art, but also new disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology began to explore such “unmodernized” cultures, perhaps revealing more about American and European attitudes than about non-Western groups. As Mariana Torgovnick suggests, “For Euro-Americans...to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other” (11).

Waugh explores the similarities and differences between the modern and the primitive in a spirit of deep ambivalence, bringing out both unexpected parallels and humorous disconnects. This representation of familiar technologies and other “modern” objects in unfamiliar surroundings may prompt Waugh’s “modern” readers to see these things in a new way. Rita Barnard suggests that *Black Mischief* urges us, despite its racist undertones, to conclude that the “everyday life of the metropolis should not be severed from what is occurring on the periphery” (178). Our perception of the people and things of the metropolis—clearly defined as London in the novel—is affected by the people and things of the periphery, Azania. In his work, “progress” never follows a linear trajectory. Inventions and other things meant to bring Azanians, Ishmaelians, and Britons into the twentieth century merely malfunction and become more clutter. Seth’s ruling grandfather Amurath, in the early days of the republic, puts all of his faith in the “single, narrow gauge track of the Grand Chemin de Fer Impérial d’Azanie,” the new railroad of the capital (*BM* 14). Metropolitan Azanians and Europeans take the train as proof of the culture and progress of the invigorated nation—despite the fact that the train causes many deaths, service is unreliable and infrequent, and most people lose their luggage. A hodgepodge of ancient superstitions and ill-fitting Westernized innovations, the Azanian

capital is a “haphazard jumble of shops, missions, barracks, legations, bungalows and native huts” (19). The people themselves are a mix of native Sakuyu and Wanda, well-heeled members of the ancient Arab quarter, and Europeans who find posts in Azania because their indolence or misbehavior has hurt their job prospects at home. Mail comes monthly or even more rarely, bringing a passel of *Punches*, *Graphics*, *New Yorkers*, and copies of *The Times* to the delighted members of the British Legation. Women of the capital try to stay stylish, but they must make do with fashions of several seasons ago.

Despite the inevitable lag in the arrival of new fashions, Seth heralds modernity and newness. While Seth bans the totemism associated with old Azanian superstitions, he seems to invest a totemic power in “modern” and Western ideas and objects—like his army’s one tank (commonly referred to with a capital letter, as “the Tank”), which Seth imbues with a sort of magical efficacy despite his Scottish military commander’s assertions that it will be useless. Another object of Seth’s veneration is birth control, which provides the basis for a nationwide religious-style gala that he deputizes Basil to organize. The centerpiece of the gala is a parade, in which local women carry “typewriters, tennis rackets, motor bicycling goggles, telephones, hitchhiking outfits and other patents of modernity inspired by the European illustrated papers” (249). This investment of certain objects with the ability to bring Azania into the modern age, absent of any structural changes, seems doomed to make the country even more of a jumble. Yet far from simply mocking the Africans’ ineffectual and partial adoption of Western innovations, Waugh both prompts us to take a new look at these technologies in British life and exploits their comic absurdity. Even if they do not necessarily bring progress or

laudable cultural development to the nation of Azania, these multifarious and fascinating things certainly bring vivacity to Waugh's narrative.

Waugh often staggers representations of life in the jungle, in which people marvel at gramophones, and representations of life in the metropolis, in which people decorate their homes with "primitive" items (as Princess Jenny does). In *A Handful of Dust*, the homebody Tony Last impulsively takes a trip to the wilderness of Brazil after learning that Brenda plans to divorce him. His partner and guide, the aptly named Dr. Messinger, saddles Tony with a cumbersome, incongruous assortment of items that, he assures, will help them survive and dazzle the natives (thus ensuring their assistance as guides). On board the ship, Tony looks at the items to convince himself of the reality of the mission:

Even the presence in the hold of two vast crates, bearing his name and labelled *not wanted on voyage*—crates containing such new and unfamiliar possessions as a medicine chest, an automatic shotgun, camping equipment, pack saddles, a cinema camera, dynamite, disinfectants, a collapsible canoe, filters, tinned butter and, strangest of all, an assortment of what Dr Messinger called 'trade goods'—failed to convince him fully of the serious nature of his expedition. Dr Messinger had arranged everything. It was he who chose the musical boxes and mechanical mice, the mirrors, combs, perfumery, pills, fish hooks, axe-heads, coloured rockets, and rolls of artificial silk, which were packed in the box of 'trade goods.' (150)

With this many items, it is not surprising that many of them are lost or left behind along the way. On the ship, turbulence leaves "all destructible objects disposed on the cabin floors" (156). Ants break into the edible portions on their arrival in Brazil, and women of the Macushi tribe—which Dr. Messinger has enlisted to help them in their journey—steal their sugar. Strenuous walking and voyages in small, rickety canoes force Tony and Dr. Messinger to abandon many items. In particular, the "trade goods" brought to assure that the natives will assist them in their travels fail to have their desired effect.

At first, the Macushis seem suitably dazzled by Tony's cargo. The men approach, "gazing at the camp equipment. Tony tried to photograph them but they ran away giggling like schoolgirls" (170). Yet the Macushis' laughter at and fear of the modern camera equipment is amplified—and made more absurd—with the introduction of some toy mechanical mice. Dr. Messinger sets one running, "tinkling merrily" toward the "apprehensive" and attentive natives. The movement of the mouse leads, immediately, to a "loud intake of breath, a series of horrified, small grunts, a high wail of terror from the women, and a sudden stampede" (183). Apparently fearing the evil spirits they assume are contained within the moving metal mice, the natives do not return, marooning Tony and Dr. Messinger with no means of finding shelter or the way home.

The natives' comic horror at the strange toys may make them seem very different from the British, yet Waugh also draws out similarities between the two groups. Left alone in the wilderness, Tony becomes ill and Dr. Messinger drowns in the river. Alone and suffering, Tony hallucinates scenes from the English life he has lost, often mixing details of his present wild surroundings with memories of his life with Brenda. The city of London, in his frightening fantasies, replaces the underground train with a "green line" composed of oversized mechanical mice (194). These hallucinations accentuate the other ways in which the cultures are intertwined. Though Tony and Dr. Messinger think of the people as disconnected from the modern world, the Macushis have somehow acquired some of the castoffs of modern Europe and North America; one woman, Rosa, has acquired a love of cigarettes from an ex-lover, an African-American man, and many of the women wear grubby calico dresses given to them by Anglo-American missionaries.

In Tony's fever-dreams, Brenda appears wearing one of these dowdy dresses. These outdated and disused bits of Western ephemera call attention to the lives of the things after they are no longer considered (by some people, at least) to be fashionable or useful. In the nightmarishly comic conclusion to the story, Tony is kidnapped by Mr. Todd, a Macushi man who prizes his library of Dickens novels, moldering and preserved in leaves. He forces Tony to read him the books every day, cutting off his contact to the outside world. The absurdness of Tony's fate suggests, as Jonathan Greenberg proposes, that the "heart of darkness...is not brutal barbarism but the sentimental pieties of culture" ("Was" 368). Neither the Macushis in Brazil nor the Victorian culture represented by the Dickens reference can provide the order and meaning that Tony longs for. In detailing Tony's harrowing adventure, Waugh draws on rhetoric from his time about the modern world becoming more primitive, but the ending makes it difficult to discern the precise relationship between Britain and the "jungle."

Are People "Just" Things?

The ending of *A Handful of Dust* is absurd enough to likely preclude readers from sympathizing with the suffering Tony. In other cases, Waugh's abandonment of his characters to cruel fates may produce a more divided response. His novels not only trouble ways of classifying and using things but also problematize the distinction between a person and a thing. By comically representing human characters as things, Waugh jarringly places these people in traumatic and violent situations.

Two very similar scenes appear in Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), and one of his last works, the dystopian novella *Love Among the Ruins* (1953). In *Decline*

and Fall, the young, well-intentioned Paul Pennyfeather finds himself in jail for the crimes of his fiancée, who (unknown to him) operated a prostitution ring. The prison governor, Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery, explains that he has made changes to the treatment of criminals by rehabilitating rather than punishing them. He brags that Paul, whom he calls Case D.412, “far from being a mere nameless slave...has now become part of a great revolution in statistics” (227). Though Lucas-Dockery believes that this new approach restores Paul’s humanity, his technique actually requires Paul to be treated as a number rather than a person. In *Love Among the Ruins*, a similar prison official assures the arsonist Miles Plastic that he is not really a criminal—just the “victim of inadequate social services” (10). Symbolically deprived of the human capacity for choice—the choice to commit his crimes—Miles too is “rehabilitated” by the system, which promises to make him into a person. The deputy chief tells him as he prepares to leave the prison, “This little pile of papers is *you*. When I stamp them, Miles the Problem ceases to exist and Mr. Plastic the citizen is born” (13). Emphasizing the state’s power to grant and rescind personhood, the deputy chief reminds Miles not to lose his “Certificate of Human Personality,” which he describes as a “*vital* document” (14, Waugh’s emphasis). The adjective *vital* underlines the way in which the social system in Waugh’s novella troubles the distinction between persons and things, bestowing agency on a stack of papers—or, perhaps, reducing a life to a stack of papers.

These two scenes, appearing in works separated by decades, testify to an enduring concern with what constitutes a person and, alternately, what constitutes a thing. Like Jean Rhys, Waugh calls attention to the sometimes hazy distinction between the two

concepts, although his works of the late twenties and the thirties are far more farcical than her thirties novels. Critics who have addressed this issue, including Michael Gorra and Douglas Patey, suggest that Waugh's novels use these farcical situations to shore up the distinction between persons and things. According to Gorra and Patey, Waugh critiques a modern culture that robs people of their humanity and, accordingly, their capacity for choice, reflection, and agency, treating fictional characters like things in order to defend the personhood of their real-life counterparts.

In focusing on the hesitation in Waugh's novels over whether it is possible to judge, order, and classify persons and things, I draw on the ongoing debate over the meaning of Waugh's humor—a humor that draws heavily on the treatment of people as things, and on the use of things for unexpected purposes. Through the years, many critics have suggested that Waugh's early works satirize their subjects from a fixed moral position, a foundation of values Waugh hopes that the reader will share. Patey, for example, argues that Waugh's irony “depends on a fund of unspoken agreement between writer and reader” and that his works qualify as “fundamentally conservative” satire that “usually ratifies existing moral and social norms” (62). Gorra writes that the early works have “at [their] core a lament that belief is impossible, and there is nothing to keep [the] characters from being mere soulless things” (210).⁷

⁷ I have focused on Patey and Gorra here because Patey's work is relatively recent; Gorra's work, while somewhat older, remains influential. Many previous critiques of Waugh also suggest that his work has a stable foundation of values. Some of these critical works include Jeffrey Heath's *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing* (1983), Stephen Greenblatt's *Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley* (1966), and Alain Blayac's *Evelyn Waugh* (1991).

Others, however, have challenged the idea that the novels articulate a coherent ideology or derive from a stable point of view. Lisa Colletta points out that Waugh's "early novels offer nothing salutary in their stinging satire," with all representatives of religious and political positions subjected to ridicule (82). The main purpose of his satire, Colletta contends, is not to offer a corrective to modern society but rather to use laughter as a meager comfort in a world that is, and has always been, chaotic and absurd. Jonathan Greenberg takes a similar approach, focusing on the extent of the cruelty Waugh exercises against his characters. "In Evelyn Waugh's universe, life is nasty, British, and short," Greenberg writes (*Modernism* 70). Deaths and injuries in his works sometimes befall people who are corrupt and, perhaps, deserving of retribution; in other cases, they happen to children and other innocents, and Waugh subtly encourages readers to condemn the apathy of their parents or others. Yet while some of this cruelty may prod readers to adopt an ethical response, the sheer pervasiveness of violence and death in the novels encourages readers to take pleasure in the characters' misfortune ("Was" 53). Like Colletta and Greenberg, I argue that the standpoint of Waugh's irony is not nearly as clear or as stable as some readers have suggested. Contrary to Gorra's claim, Waugh did not necessarily lament the fact that many of his characters could be seen as "mere soulless things."

Waugh describes characters' possessions in much detail, suggesting that these inanimate things have more animation and vivacity than the people themselves. Like Isherwood, he dismisses the idea that things provide insight into people's personalities. For Waugh, the interiority that such collections are meant to convey is either inaccessible

or nonexistent. In *Put Out More Flags* (1941), Waugh emphasizes the possessions of a character traveling on a train, dismissing the idea that these things might reveal her “personality”:

All [Angela Lyne’s] properties—the luggage heaped above and around her, the set of her hair, her shoes, her fingernails, the barely perceptible aura of scent that surrounded her—all these things spoke of what (had she been, as she seemed, American) she would have called her “personality.” But the face was mute. It might have been carved in jade, it was so smooth and cool and conventionally removed from the human...A stranger might have watched her for mile after mile...Had he been told the bare facts about this seemingly cosmopolitan, passionless, barren, civilized woman, he might have despaired of ever again forming his judgment of a fellow being... (24–25)

While Angela’s “properties”—her mute, inhuman material possessions—offer tantalizing insights into the aloof woman’s inner self, her unknowability is conveyed in a comparison of her person to one of those very mute, inhuman material things.

In many cases, the things a person carries or showcases serve as the only means of distinguishing him or her, and these things can easily be lost as characters try on new roles. Paul Pennyfeather is initially identified at Oxford by his pipe, bicycle, and scholarly books about the Anglican Church and the League of Nations, but acquires a whole new set of belongings upon entering into a romantic relationship with the wealthy Margot. After being sent to jail, he must surrender the various gifts from Margot that mark him off as a gentleman. The entrance guard inventories the possessions on his person: “Shoes, brown, one pair; socks, fancy, one pair; suspenders, black silk, one pair...Cigarette case, white metal, containing two cigarettes; watch, white metal; tie pin, fancy...” (*DF* 219). As in the customs scene in *Vile Bodies*, the officials must categorize a bewildering array of things, including a fancy “cigar piercer.” Paul loses the

possessions as easily as he won them, becoming a prisoner without his own clothing or personal effects.

Waugh regularly disparages interior decoration, still a new field in the thirties, which offered customers the opportunity of simply purchasing a thing-based “personality” wholesale, rather than patching together a hodgepodge of items themselves. In *A Handful of Dust*, after Brenda buys a flat in London, John’s mother Mrs. Beaver tries but fails to sell her items with which to furnish it. The items she offers represent a range of new technologies and spurious antiques:

Mrs Beaver tried to sell her a set of needlework pictures for the walls, but these she refused, also an electric bed warmer, a miniature weighing machine for the bathroom, a frigidaire, an antique grandfather clock, a backgammon set of looking-glass and synthetic ivory, a set of prettily bound French eighteenth-century poets, a massage apparatus, and a wireless set fitted in a case of Regency lacquer, all of which had been grouped in the shop for her as a ‘suggestion.’ (53)

This readymade grouping of objects effectively critiques the use of possessions to express an individual “personality,” as anyone might purchase a similar assortment from Mrs. Beaver (and, we are told, Mrs. Beaver is not short of buyers for the set). The list also emphasizes the shamness of most modern furnishings, in that many of the items are “synthetic,” examples of passing fads, or designed to look older than they are.

Speaking to a *Paris Review* interviewer in 1963, Waugh denied the existence of “flat” or “round” characters, insisting that authors simply provided more information about some characters than others. Challenged by the interviewer to account for the difference between the comic caricature Mr. Prendergast, from *Decline and Fall* (1928), and the more complex and sensitive depiction of Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited* (written during World War II), Waugh elaborated that Sebastian was a “protagonist”

while Mr. Prendergast was merely “furniture. One gives only one aspect of the furniture” (Jebb 70). None of the characters in Waugh’s interwar novels seem to qualify as more than “furniture.” They are not complex and do not seem to have the capability to change. In *Decline and Fall*, Waugh’s narrator—nearly invisible in his other early novels—offers explanations for how the characters are represented. He compares the main character to “one of those wire toys which street vendors dangle from trays,” acting without reflection or motive (180). This character, he claims, is a “shadow that has flitted about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather,” and the “only interest about him arises from the unusual series of events of which his shadow was a witness.” Indeed, Paul lurches from place to place through reacting to circumstances rather than through taking action of his own will. He is kicked out of college for appearing naked in public after a loutish undergraduate society tears off his clothes, works as a schoolmaster after his uncle gets him the job, and is sent to jail after becoming engaged to an enticing woman who wants him to take the fall for her prostitution scheme. However, the narrator also explains that Pennyfeather is, outside of the novel, a complex, fully formed human being capable of change and cognition (162–64).

The narrator’s metafictional comments offer a window into Waugh’s ambivalence about representing people as things. At some times, Waugh suggests that a soulless modern society is to blame for his modern characters acting like wire toys; at others, he suggests that people simply are things as well as persons, and always have been. In the novel, the futurist architect Otto Silenus celebrates the consideration of people as things, linking it to a mechanistic modernist aesthetic. He expresses disdain for domestic

architecture, avowing that the “only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men” (159). Waugh alternates between endorsing Silenus’s perspective and mocking him by making him even more grotesquely inhuman than the other characters. Left on his own to drink tea and eat biscuits, Silenus is found hours later: “the hand which had held the biscuit still rose to and fell from his mouth with a regular motion, while his empty jaws champed rhythmically; otherwise he was wholly immobile” (161). Yet Silenus is also knowing, summing up Waugh’s fictional technique in terms rivaling the narrator’s. He tells Paul that the most basic social division is not between men and women or rich and poor but rather between static and dynamic persons. Those who are static are content to be quiet and domestic; those who are dynamic are like fast-moving machines that thrive on change (282). The balance becomes disrupted when a static person, like Paul, accidentally finds his life altered by more dynamic persons. This apt description of the novel’s structure emphasizes people’s mechanical nature—something that Waugh, like Silenus, exploits in his art.

Waugh’s conflicted representation of Silenus, as both grotesque machine and sage observer of the way people operate, is part of a larger mixed reaction to all that Waugh considered modern. Though he critiqued futurism and other modernist styles, he frequently used techniques associated with this aesthetic—such as montage and an obsession with new technologies, like the telephone and the gramophone.⁸ While the idea

⁸ For more on Waugh’s conflicted approach to a modernist or experimental aesthetic, see Brooke Allen’s “Vile Bodies: A Futurist Fantasy.” Several critiques of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), including Laura Mooneyham’s “The Triple Conversions of *Brideshead Revisited*” and Dominic Manganiello’s “The Beauty that Saves: *Brideshead Revisited* as a Counter-Portrait of the Artist,” make the case that the novel employs modernist tropes

that people are or should be like things is not exclusive to the literature (and, especially, the satire) of Waugh's time, it has been repeatedly associated with the experimental writing that Waugh both disdained and drew upon.

Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis, two theorists closely associated with literary modernism, both published works defining comedy or satire as the treatment of people as things. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Bergson writes that the comic involves a mixture of the mechanical and the human—what he calls “*something mechanical encrusted upon the living*.” Therefore, machinelike bodies, rigid behavior, and repetition, all of which call our attention to a failure to adapt to a changing world, are laughable (39, emphasis in original). Similarly, Lewis's *The Wild Body* (as well as several of his essays) calls attention to those comic moments that show a person's body—the material component that makes a person a thing—eluding his or her mental control. This sense of the comic thingness of people led Lewis to embrace an exteriorist model of fiction, emphasizing people's outsides rather than their insides. As he wrote of his novel *The Apes of God*, “no book has ever been written that has paid more attention to the outside of people. In it their shells, or pelts, or the language of their bodily movements, comes first, not last” (46).

Waugh wrote an admiring review of Lewis's work, singling out in particular the “observations about the ‘Outside and Inside’ method of fiction,” which Waugh concluded that “[n]o novelist and very few intelligent novel readers can afford to neglect” (*EAR*

but eventually rejects them in favor of a more explicitly Catholic aesthetic. Yet while Waugh converted to Catholicism in 1930, the effects of his conversion are less evident in his interwar novels than they are in *Brideshead* and later works.

102). Several critics have noted the similarities between Waugh and Lewis. Carlos Villar Flor and Noella Rodriguez identify both Waugh and Lewis with a “new externalist satire” in which “the word is concrete, the sentences refer to a certain external behavior, and...the plot is a movement towards an external change in the circumstances that surround the characters” (198).⁹ They oppose this “externalist satire” to the more psychologically driven fictions that they associate with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. For Waugh as for Bergson and Lewis (and Jean Rhys, as I discussed in the previous chapter), people resemble things partly because they seem like reproductions, no different from photographic prints or machines. *The Apes of God*, for example, refers to a character’s “mass-production grin” (Lewis 47; qtd. in North, *Machine* 116). Waugh’s later novel *The Loved One* elaborates on the idea that people have been mass-produced, as the poet Dennis Barlow thinks about a woman’s legs: “Which came first in this strange civilization, he wondered, the foot or the shoe, the leg or the nylon stocking? Or were these uniform elegant limbs, from the stocking-top down, marketed in one cellophane envelope at the neighbourhood-store?” (86).

While Waugh’s humor can be aligned to both Lewis and Bergson, there are significant differences between the two theorists. The tension between their theories of comedy helps illuminate the tension at the heart of Waugh’s thing-based comedy. For Bergson, comedy serves as a social corrective, reminding people to develop the elasticity

⁹ See also Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell, who suggest that both writers criticized the conformity of youth culture and the uncritical journalistic celebration of young people (172). Jonathan Greenberg wonders why Lewis has attracted so much renewed critical attention, while Waugh has been comparatively neglected, since the two writers are so similar (“Cannibals” 115).

to respond to different people and situations (87–88). Laughter and ridicule, he writes, remind people to be humans, not things. For Lewis, however, people (with the possible exception of the perceptive satirist) simply *are* things, and they cannot choose not to be. He writes that “*all* men are necessarily comic, because they are things...behaving as persons” (158, emphasis added). A person walking up stairs is as funny as a bag of potatoes or a lamp walking up stairs would be, and calling attention to this fact serves no humanist purpose.

Though Waugh praised Lewis’s theories, there are clearly examples in which he laments the mechanization and uniformity of the human person, proposing or at least wishing that things could be otherwise. *A Handful of Dust*, for example, bitterly mocks Brenda Last’s London group of friends, for whom everyone is replaceable. The novel begins with a description of John Beaver, known as “London’s only spare man” because he is constantly called to stand in the place of people who “chuck” or cancel their social engagements (42). Beaver’s social capital rises when the fashionable Brenda inexplicably becomes infatuated with him, using him as a “spare” for her husband, Tony. This idea that everyone can be replaced leads people to react flippantly to death and loss. The Beavers’ son John dies as a result of a horrific riding accident, but no one—including his parents—is very troubled. The one person who expresses concern for the boy’s fate is the ridiculous Princess Jenny, who commonly uses melodramatic situations to call attention to herself. Jenny sobs that the death was her “fault” because “a terrible curse hangs over me,” and then proceeds to wail over the fate of “Little Jimmy” (110). This callousness,

Waugh suggests, is symptomatic of a world in which people view others as endlessly substitutable for one another, with even the life of a little boy not worthy of lamentation.

Still, for each tragic death in Waugh's work, there is at least another one exploited sheerly for dark humor. During Paul's short tenure as a schoolmaster in *Decline and Fall*, the young Lord Tangent gradually succumbs to complications resulting from being shot by the rifle used to signal the beginning of a track-and-field competition. No one, not even his parents, mourns the death; the bizarre circumstances of the accident and its offhand (dare I say, *tangential*) treatment in the narrative barely invites our sympathy. The comedy in this situation is dependent on Tangent's status as part person, part thing: because Tangent is fictional and because he is treated as a thing, simply a body in the way of a bullet, the death is not tragic; because he is, at least theoretically, human, the offhand treatment of the death produces shock and laughter.

The difficulty of determining the meaning of Waugh's comedy, and his treatment of people as things, is especially evident in a scene in *Black Mischief* featuring cannibalism. Waugh frequently mocks the sleepy, oblivious British ambassador Sir Samson Courtenay, who has landed in Azania due to his general ineptitude at any work he has tried back home. The novel also lambastes his daughter Prudence, a silly young woman enamored of modern fashions. Fascinated by literature and technology, Prudence attempts to form a sophisticated personality through imitation. She repeats words she picked up "from a book" to her lovers, and practices her "gramophone record voice" on them (59–60). First attracted to the aptly named William Bland, a colleague of her father's, she is then enraptured by the louche adventurer Basil Seal. Prudence speaks of

their affair in sentimental clichés, describing sex as the “crying out of the Soul for completion” (80). Waugh mocks the actual tawdriness of the affair by comparing it to an extinguished cigar unfurling in a pool of dirty water.

Like most of Waugh’s characters, Prudence is a caricature rather than a person—what Waugh would have described as a piece of furniture. Yet it is still a shock when she is killed, cooked, and eaten in a feast (and Basil unwittingly partakes in the meal). When Seth is deposed and a war breaks out, the British hasten to flee the country, but Prudence’s plane goes missing. At a funeral service for the murdered Seth, Basil gives a speech in native Sakuyu, sharing a feast of bread and sweet-smelling, spicy meat with the gathered crowd (300). He recognizes Prudence’s bright red beret—a cute accessory that he has admired in the past—when an Azanian chief shows it to him, saying, “Look...Pretty” (301). To Basil’s frantic questioning as to where Prudence is, the man at length explains: “‘The white woman? Why, here,’ he patted his distending paunch. ‘You and I and the big chiefs—we have just eaten her’” (302).

Cannibalism, in Waugh’s novel and in other representations, is shocking in part because it turns people entirely into things. *Black Mischief* forces us as readers to square the image of Prudence meeting Basil in her jaunty beret with the image of Prudence transformed into aromatic meat. The startling disconnect between these two images may make us laugh (uneasily), but it also impels us to question the value of Prudence’s life, and to ponder whether she is, ultimately, more than a *thing*. The narrator’s failure to comment on this development—and the elision of Basil’s reaction—makes the question all the more startling. The cannibal feast is one of the main reasons *Black Mischief* was,

and continues to be, controversial. In a 1933 article in the Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, Ernest Oldmeadow labeled the novel “disgraceful and scandalous,” “coarse,” and “disgusting,” noting in particular the “nauseating” cannibal feast (135). He objected to the unsentimental presentation of Prudence’s body, “stewed to pulp among peppers and aromatic roots”—a description that he claimed was lascivious and did not properly capture the gravity of Prudence’s demise (Greenberg, “Cannibals” 120; *BM* 300).

Waugh responded to the attack in a letter critiquing Oldmeadow’s “literal-mindedness” (*L* 74), suggesting that the meaning of his novel would be apparent to all except the “semi-literate” (75). He explained that the purpose of *Black Mischief*, including the cannibalism scene, was to highlight barbaric practices in order to condemn them. The explanation seems to support those, like Gorra and Patey, who find a consistent moral position in Waugh’s works, and who think that Waugh defends characters’ humanity in an increasingly dehumanizing world. Yet in describing the feast, Waugh raised the difficulty of determining his tone:

The Tablet quotes the fact that [Prudence] was stewed with pepper, as being in some way a particularly lubricious process. But this is a particular prejudice of the Editor’s, attributable, perhaps, like much of his criticism, to defective digestion. It cannot matter whether she was roasted, grilled, braised or pickled, cut into sandwiches or devoured hot on toast as a savoury; the fact is that the poor girl was cooked and eaten, and that is obviously and admittedly a disagreeable end. (*L* 77)

In enumerating all of the ways Prudence’s body might have been prepared, Waugh makes light of this violent objectification even as he defends its gravity. Rather than clarifying the intent or effect of the cannibalism scene in the novel, Waugh’s explanation is similarly complex and conflicted. The flippant tone invites both our laughter at the death and devouring of a character—someone at least nominally resembling a human being—

and a sense of shock that might translate into empathy. The response also, in its reference to the editor's "defective digestion," objectifies Oldmeadow, deflecting the attention from his objection to his body mechanics.

The cannibal scene has continued to attract controversy, with recent critics less concerned with Waugh's cruelty to Prudence and more concerned with puzzling out how this brutality reflects on both Africans and Europeans in the novel. The book as a whole—like many of Waugh's works—often juxtaposes British and Azanian ways of doing things in order to critique them both. (For example, when Basil is told not to serve raw beef at a banquet so as not to appear backward, he gives directions to serve raw beef anyway—but calls it steak tartare.) Many critics have claimed that Waugh is not racist, or at least not more racist than his contemporaries, because the emphasis of his critique is on Europeans. Patey writes of *Black Mischief*, "Waugh invites laughter at the spectacle of black natives in top hat and tails, at barefoot savages given the titles earl and viscount; but he insists even more on European barbarity" (99).¹⁰ Yet others use the cannibal scene to suggest that Waugh ultimately ridicules and degrades the Africans far more than their European counterparts. As much as Waugh mocks the inanity and savagery of cocktail party guests, this reasoning goes, he does not suggest that bored rich Londoners eat each other. For Michael Ross, the scene shows that Basil's (and Waugh's) "'dangerous flirtations with barbarism' turn out to be no more than that—flirtations" as this climax of

¹⁰ Waugh made many parallels between the Africans and the British in his travel narratives, as Patey also notes. He concludes *Remote People* (1931), the travel book that in large part inspired the novel *Black Mischief*, by noting that a trendy London cellar is "hotter than Zanzibar, noisier than the market at Harar, more reckless of the decencies of hospitality than the taverns of Kabalo or Tabora....Just watch London knock the spots off the Dark Continent" (240).

the novel emphasizes the differences between Europeans and the brutal Sakuyu tribe (89).

Waugh does insist upon some differences between the British and the Sakuyu tribe, known for brutality and licentiousness. The Sakuyu are introduced as “black, naked, anthropagous,” a description that dehumanizes them and accentuates their physical difference from the Europeans. After their victory in the initial battle in the novel, they refuse to exercise the restraint Seth has encouraged, instead abducting white women, wearing around their necks the “members of a slain enemy” and eating some of their opponents (49, 57). Does this association of the Sakuyu with cannibalism suggest that Western culture has a greater respect for the dignity of the person? Does it even indicate Waugh’s respect for human dignity and integrity, as he suggested in *Tablet*? The attribution of cannibalism to “primitives” is common, appearing in texts such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party*.¹¹ In making cannibalism one of the main identifiers of the Sakuyu, Waugh replicates this practice. Yet as Kristen Guest has pointed out, the attribution of cannibalism to non-Western cultures, while it may be intended to indicate the fundamental difference between civilization and the primitive, is also unsettling because the shock of cannibalism relies on sameness: “the idea of cannibalism prompts a visceral reaction among people precisely because it activates our horror of consuming others like ourselves...Ultimately, then, it is the shared humanness of cannibals and their victims that draws our attention to the problems raised

¹¹ See Priscilla Walton’s *Our Cannibals, Ourselves* for an extensive analysis of the depiction of the cannibal Other in Anglo-American literature and culture, from Victorian literature through “Gilligan’s Island.”

by the notion of absolute difference” (3). Basil’s accidental participation in the feast also makes the separation between civility and barbarism less absolute. Indeed, an earlier remark of Basil’s foreshadows Prudence’s ultimate fate: “You’re a grand girl, Prudence, and I’d like to eat you.” Coquettishly, Prudence responds, “So you shall, my sweet” (237).

Timothy Christensen points out that the ritual eating of a human body at a feast has parallels with the Christian Eucharist—and that Catholicism, Waugh’s newly adopted faith, was particularly linked to cannibalism (176). This similarity makes it difficult to claim that Waugh’s early novels look to Catholic or Christian beliefs as a source for order in a disorderly world, in which people may be treated as things. Michael Ross, who provides a useful corrective to the critical urge to ignore or explain Waugh’s racism, overstates the case when he claims that Waugh “never questions...the binary” between civilization and barbarism, and that the reader is not even “prompted to interrogate it” (90). Waugh leaves unresolved whether the cannibal scene is a condemnation of brutality, both British and foreign, or a darkly comic transformation of a person into a thing. Whatever we conclude about it, however, the scene—like many others—impels us to think of people and things in new, jarring ways.

Waugh again associates the “primitive” with cannibalism in *Scoop* (1938), in which he foregrounds both the shocking transformation of a person into a thing and the incongruous combination of modern European and tribal African cultures. Like *Black Mischief*, *Scoop* features a war-torn, imaginary African nation into which Westerners have brought their implements of modernity—though in this case, they have had a much

more hostile reception. The novel mentions the encounters between Europeans and Ishmaelians in the 1870s, when explorers and missionaries came to the country “furnished with suitable equipment of cuckoo clocks, phonographs, opera hats, draft-treaties and flags of the nations they had been obliged to leave...None returned. They were eaten, every one of them” (106). The characterization of this odd assortment of things as “suitable” underlines their incongruity. The silly, extraneous nature of the things brought into Ishmaelia lessens readers’ sympathy for the plight of the hapless cannibal victims, and one might sense a connection between the reobjectification of “opera hats” in a setting with no need for them, where they will probably never be used for visiting the opera, and the reobjectification of the victims themselves, violently objectified by being eaten. As in *Black Mischief*, the attribution of cannibalism to the Africans makes them into cartoonish stereotypes of “primitive” natives, but at the same time the novel does not exactly sentimentalize the victims’ fates. Waugh’s reference to the “flags of the nations” the visitors “had been obliged to leave” underlines these people’s comic shabbiness and undesirability. The people bringing culture, religion, and modern theories of government—represented through the things they bring with them to Africa—are hardly attractive representatives of these institutions or belief systems, and they suggest Waugh’s skepticism of these sources of order or meaning.

Like Christopher Isherwood, Waugh presents political objects like flags and treaties as things, not symbols. His fictional world is chaotic, but there is no stable meaning underneath the chaos. The only solace lies in uneasy laughter. Still, Waugh occasionally does refer to the comfort that order and stability would provide. I want to

end with a vision of an ultimately dashed hope for such stability. In *Vile Bodies*, the out-of-touch ex-Prime Minister William Outrage discusses the current political climate with Lord Metroland and Father Rothschild, who mentions an inevitable war coming: “Wars don’t start nowadays because people want them. We long for peace, and fill our newspapers with conferences about disarmament and arbitration, but there is a radical instability in our whole world-order, and soon we shall all be walking into the jaws of destruction again, protesting our pacific intentions” (185). But the warning goes unheeded, as Lord Metroland retires to his study thinking about the “radical instability” Rothschild has warned about:

He looked round his study and saw shelves of books—the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in an early and very bulky edition, *Who’s Who*, Debrett, Burke, Whitaker, several volumes of Hansard, some Blue Books and Atlases—a safe in the corner painted green with a brass handle, his writing-table, his secretary’s table, some very comfortable chairs and some very businesslike chairs, a tray with decanters and a plate of sandwiches, his evening mail laid out on the table...radical instability, indeed. (187)

Waugh shows an anxiety about a coming war but presents material things—particularly “very bulky,” heavy things—as a source of solace and stability amid social breakdown. Unlike the traveling cleft sticks, gramophones, and army boots, these assorted study furnishings promise to stay in their place and represent order for Lord Metroland. They are objects, or symbols, that represent a way of life for him. Yet despite Lord Metroland’s contention that his comforting books, tables and chairs show a lack of “radical instability” in England, war is indeed coming, and breaks out by the end of the novel (though, of course, it would take nine more years for war to come to the real England). Waugh’s other thirties novels continue to make reference to a likely war as well as other

traumatic social changes on the way, and many characters, like Lord Metroland, look to their possessions for reassurance that their familiar world will survive whatever violence or instability is to come. Waugh's dark comedy promises that neither Lord Metroland nor his very comfortable chairs can ward against radical instability, and also hints that such instability may be felt in any culture and time period.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOYING WITH THINGS: THINGS, GENRE, AND GENERATIONS

IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S INTERWAR NOVELS

When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too? All my life I have said, "Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs"—and what a mistake.
—Elizabeth Bowen, letter to Virginia Woolf, 1940

Shall we not always love, above what is made already, that which we can make into something else?
—Elizabeth Bowen, "Toys"

Like Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen investigates shifts in the ways things can be used. "Younger by a year or two than the century," as she describes one of her characters, Bowen strongly correlates her characters' uncertainty and awkwardness to the time they are living in (*Heat* 24). She repeatedly raises the idea that interwar children and young adults treat things differently than their forebears did. The older generation clings to estates and furnishings; their children (or, more often in Bowen's work, their nieces and nephews) are ambivalent to their hefty inheritances, neither wanting to dispose of them entirely nor to live lives dictated by the things of the past. They tend to be more restless and uprooted, and this restlessness shows in their tentative, clumsy way of handling things, their constant need to touch them for reassurance, their general feeling that nothing they own truly belongs to them.

Bowen's novels take a sustained interest in tables, chairs, toys, and other things, often presenting even commonplace items in mysterious and new ways. Her characters find interior decoration to be an amusing diversion, and order and reorder their possessions in various arrangements. They find chairs—"incredible in their survival" even when the world around them changes—sources of solace after emotional disturbances (*TLS* 251). They fidget with gloves and spoons when they are nervous. Yet they are unnerved by the objects' failure to return their gaze or their emotional investment, by the objects' insistence on simply remaining and existing—until, in some cases, they are destroyed by bombs.

Lately, there has been something of a renaissance in Bowen studies, after some years of scholarly neglect. This neglect has resulted, largely, from the difficulty in placing her works. For many, Bowen seems to be not quite a modernist, not quite a realist. This ambivalent response matches that given to many other thirties writers, including Isherwood and Waugh. Bowen is sometimes dismissed as a lesser Virginia Woolf for her mixing of some of the hallmarks of modernist experimentation with more conventional domestic or realist fiction. She writes in sentences that are frequently convoluted and strange, and sometimes it is difficult to tell whether their awkwardness is intentional. Even her defenders often have difficulties explaining the charms of her work, speaking of the novels as "mysterious" or "elusive."

Recent critics have begun to suggest that the "frustrating" or incongruous aspects of Bowen's work are not evidence that she is only a minor writer (as has previously been claimed) but rather areas for further inquiry. These recent critics herald her work for the

breaks, gaps, and sinister qualities lurking within seemingly mundane domestic settings, suggesting that her work is more innovative and experimental than has previously been acknowledged.¹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, for example, argue that the novels encourage “fundamental rereadings...[that] effect a deconstruction of everything that is seemingly most conventional and reassuring about the very notion of the novel” (xvi). Rather than treating Bowen as a realist novelist, as generations of critics have done, they suggest a new attention to the “‘dissolution’...the loosening, fading away, breaking up, unsolving” of narrative and character in her work (xvii). Maud Ellmann comments that although Bowen is often classified as a “social realist,” beyond the “richness of association” in her books is a series of “frictional disjunctions” (4). Other critics also propose a new respect for Bowen’s habit of melding or toying with multiple genres and registers, including realism, modernism, the gothic, the “woman’s novel,” and “sensationalistic fiction.”² Critics have also proposed new affinities between Bowen and a wide variety of writers and artists, including Samuel Beckett, the Surrealists, and turn-

¹ A notable exception to this trend is John Coates, who argues that “critics may be so preoccupied with what a text is hiding that they do not do sufficient justice to the subtlety and complexity of what it appears (at least *prima facie*) to be saying,” and that Bowen’s work has particularly suffered from this critical tendency (4).

² For example, Shannon Wells-Lassagne has recently pointed out that Bowen’s novels and short stories, with their emphasis on murders and illegitimate births, have notable similarities to the works of H. Rider Haggard and other “sensationalist” writers. Yoriko Kitagawa suggests that Bowen’s interest in the idea of a shifting self makes her anticipate postmodern tendencies. Many more readers, including Ellmann, Patrick Moran, and Julia McElhattan Williams, explore Bowen’s interest in “hybrid genres,” yoking together realism, modernism, and the gothic.

of-the-century French writers, in addition to more obvious connections with writers such as Waugh, Woolf, and Graham Greene.³

In my exploration of Bowen's representation of things in this chapter, I draw on these productive investigations of Bowen's experimentation and blending of genre conventions. While some critics have addressed Bowen's fascination with things, I argue that most of these critiques have been too eager to suggest that she endorses one particular way of valuing or interpreting material things. Instead, I find that Bowen's work shows a fascination with shifts in the way things are used or become significant to people. I explore the generational divide and, in particular, Bowen's focus on children and young people who feel lost in the world. Herself unmoored from family connections by her mother's early death and her father's mental illness, Bowen wrote frequently about orphans sent to live with unfamiliar aunts, uncles, and half-brothers. These children and adolescents spend hours on their own in large houses filled with inherited furniture, equally comforted and threatened by its monumental presence. I discuss the toy, which fascinates Bowen because it encourages children to use things creatively, as well as her musings about who might inherit and use furniture in the future, given the changes to the family structure and threat of war on the horizon. The chapter ends with a discussion of Bowen's wartime and postwar works, in which she describes a London filled with abandoned places and furnishings, throwing into relief the need to make sense of, and learn what to do with, all of these things.

³ See, for example, Sinead Mooney's "Unstable Compounds: Bowen's Beckettian Affinities" and Allan Hepburn's "French Translations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Idea of Character."

Like many other writers of the thirties, Bowen and her characters find the otherworldliness and the seeming stability of material things appealing amidst what they see as a threatened human civilization. While many critics have suggested that Bowen uses objects (and particularly furnishings) chiefly to preserve a connection to the past, I draw on thing theory to argue that her approach is more varied. Just as Bowen may be read as a realist or a modernist or a sensationalist, her novels offer us multiple ways of looking at and responding to material things. It is my contention that no one of these approaches is ultimately sufficient, and that Bowen calls our attention to this very insufficiency.

Since Bowen has so often been referred to as a realist novelist, readers have often interpreted objects in her work as ways of establishing verisimilitude or the “reality effect.” H. G. Wells suggested as much when he admonished Bowen, “In your next book you may have pelmets in one room but you may not notice them in more than one room” (qtd. in Ellmann 130). Wells’s comment calls attention to the accumulation of detail in Bowen’s novels, assuming that they attempt to record faithfully the things that exist in a fictional world, with one example of pelmets no more important than another. Though the objects may give the world of Bowen’s novels verisimilitude, that verisimilitude is undercut by her frequent suggestion that the objects are more real than the people who walk among them—that, perhaps, the things make the people less real. If looking at the objects as part of an attempt to establish verisimilitude is ultimately unsatisfying, Bowen offers us other options. We might see things in her work as mirrors of their possessors, or as symbols of the past. However, this symbolic interpretation does not quite capture the

things' alien presence. Bowen suggests that any symbolic interpretation of material things is insufficient, in that the material world is never fully explicable and understandable in human terms (and is all the more appealing for that very elusiveness).

A few more recent critics have suggested another option, by suggesting that Bowen's work actually gives life and a voice to things. Chief among them has been Elizabeth Inglesby, who emphasizes Bowen's sensitivity to the autonomy of the material world, critiquing interpretations that treat Bowen's things only as symbols with psychic import. In doing so, she characterizes Bowen's depiction of objects as "literary animism," taking too literally the idea that things have lives of their own (306).⁴ Inglesby claims that Bowen's work suggests that things "could perform perfectly well functions usually attributed to the human heart or mind: they could remember, feel, and know things, and, not unlike the pages of a novel, they contained life and volition that only some observers could perceive" (326). She suggests that Bowen's later, postwar work takes a more complex approach to the material world, as Bowen tried to "reconcile her dearly-held notions of an animated universe with a faint suspicion that she had merely been engaging in particularly robust flights of fancy" (307). However, even Bowen's early work insists upon the mystery of the material world and its irrevocable distance from human observers. Though the narrators and characters of these works sometimes toy with the

⁴ Another critic who suggests that things "live" and "speak" in Bowen's works is Carmen Concilio, who writes that in *The Last September* "objects lose their practical function...and acquire a speech of their own" (282). However, Concilio also largely interprets objects and their meanings as projections of characters' mental states; they only "speak" what characters wish that they could say. Yoriko Kitagawa interestingly suggests that Bowen's occasional comparisons of things to people "imply the reversal of the dominance in the relationship between the human and the material" (489), but does not expand on the subject.

idea that things can remember or feel, they are all too aware that ascribing human qualities to material things in this way is a form of fancy. It is for this reason that the things fascinate and frustrate them.

Bowen's works show an awareness that things are not people, but that they are affected in various ways by the meanings people, past and present, confer on them. Her characters grapple with the disjunction between what things mean to them and what they "really" are, underneath—in an entirely different realm that is both inviting and forbidding. In *To the North*, Cecilia has carefully arranged the items on her mantelpiece, but feels alienated from them: "She exclaimed in thought: Mine, but nothing responded: Cecilia" (182). The things seem to share complicity; they "smile at each other and might be supposed after midnight to dance and tinkle" (33). This vision of Cecilia's possessions is both frightening and delightful, inviting us to consider the "life" things may have when no one is watching them. Yet contrary to Inglesby's analysis, Cecilia and Bowen are both clearly aware that the things do not actually smile, dance, or speak. Their mystery comes not only from the inability to capture what things "really" are like, but also from what they may have meant to past owners—and whether they contain some trace of the past. Bowen's novels, and often her characters, ask a variety of questions about things without necessarily offering definitive answers: What does it mean that these things continue to exist, even though many of the people who previously made, bought, or invested significance in them have gone? What meaning did they have for their previous possessors, and what meaning might they have for the people who have inherited them? Do past ideas and people continue to exert an influence on the present through the things

the people left behind? What causes matter to have meaning, and what limits are there to what matter can mean?

With her focus on the shifting significance of things, Bowen moves beyond only using things as symbols or as a means of establishing verisimilitude (two approaches that emphasize *what* things mean) to focusing on the kinds of issues thing theorists investigate (which address *how* things mean, or why things become meaningful to people). As I've suggested previously, thing theorists are concerned with the duality of things: with the *object*, defined by the way it fits into human systems of significance, and with the *thing*, defined by its aspects that elude human understanding. Everything can be both an object and a thing; we cannot help thinking of the functions that objects perform and the symbolic significance they have for us. People can also have an awareness, at certain moments, that the thing is other, alien, inscrutable. As I mentioned earlier, Bill Brown proposes that we examine the duality of things by exploring reobjectification, the shift that occurs when an entity usually used or thought of as one kind of object is used in a different and unexpected way (as another kind of object). Bowen, too, shows that through examining people's different and shifting perspectives of objects, we can perhaps catch a glimpse of the more mysterious *thing* underneath. She presents these different approaches both seriously and playfully, delighting in the ways material things can be used and imagined while acknowledging that the seriousness of the times—the feeling that war was coming, as well as the sense that social life was no longer built on a solid foundation—had made people's connection to the material world more important (and more tenuous) than ever.

Toys, Children, and Creativity

As Allan Hepburn explains in his recently edited anthology of Bowen's nonfiction writings, her works deal mainly with nouns: the anthology is titled *People, Places, Things*. Her essays about "things," given titles like "Toys," "Calico Windows," and "The Tea Kettle," linger on the interplay between function and decorativeness or form in household objects. For example, she distinguishes pretty teapots (some "singled out to be sheer ornaments") from more utilitarian teakettles: "Delightful as may be the shape, glaze, porcelain florals, gilt swags, cameo profiles, bird or scenery motifs, or all or any decorative medallions upon the teapots, without the teakettle there can be no tea" (190). Bowen also praises other writers, especially Virginia Woolf, for their attention to the material world: "Virginia Woolf's vision conferred strangeness, momentarily, on all it fell on... The bus, the lamp-post, the teacup—how formidable she found them, everyday things!" (*MT* 46).

Bowen's respect for things led her to view her own writing as a kind of material production. Bowen describes being highly conscious of the object world as she wrote, noting her "uncanny complicity with... physical surroundings, the objects, sounds, colors and lights-and-shades comprehensively known as 'the writing table.' The room, the position of the window, the convulsive and anxious grating of my chair on the board floor were hyper-significant for me: here were sensuous witnesses to my crossing the margin of a hallucinatory world" (*MT* 122, 118). Despite this entrance into a hallucinatory state, Bowen describes feeling anchored in physical reality and wanting to contribute to it: "For me reality meant the books I had read—and I turned round, as *I* was writing, from time to

time, to stare at them, unassailable in the shelves behind me...I had engaged myself to add to their number” (119). Bowen later cast herself as an artisan, writing that she did not “see...that we as writers differ in the practical sense—or can expect rightly to be differentiated—from any other freelance makers and putters on the market of luxury, or ‘special’ goods. Had I not been a writer I should probably have struck out in designing and making belts, jewellery, handbags, lampshades or something of that sort” (*Why* 53). The focus on things permeates her fiction as well. As she acknowledged, her writing can be more memorable for its evocation of inanimate objects than for its depiction of human characters. In a later preface to her first short story collection, *Encounters*, she comments critically on many aspects of her early work but praises her “susceptibility to places, particular moments, objects, and seasons of the year” (122).

As Douglas Mao has shown, this desire to make something material and lasting—a “solid object” similar to what an artisan would make—motivated many interwar writers, but their work betrays an anxiety about the passing of the age of the artisan into an age of mass production. While some writers simply indulged in nostalgia for the handmade production of the past, others (particularly those of the younger, thirties generation) looked for ways to transfer the creativity of production, the melding of the human and the object world, to other ways of handling things. Woolf, he suggests, particularly engaged in the “denaturalizing of the idea that consumption cannot be work” in her portraits of women such as Clarissa Dalloway, Betty Flanders, and Mrs. Ramsay, who express creativity through pursuits like shopping and arranging dinner parties (41). Bowen’s essays also explore the possible combination of consumption and production in

a world in which most things are no longer the products of artisans. In addition to looking back at handmade things of the past, she ultimately suggests finding new ways to experience the pleasure of making. A pair of articles on gift-giving encourages a creative, productive consumer: “Outgrowing the age of inspired making, we enter upon the age of inspired chase” (*PPT* 193). In a society in which things are increasingly mass-produced, she proposes turning the use of things into a creative pursuit.

In finding ways to transmute the consumption or purchase of things into a kind of making, Bowen suggests that we look to the model of the child and his or her toy. A child, she notes, “finds or makes its own toy” if not provided with one, although the toy that comes from elsewhere has “something added...an outside magic” (*PPT* 178). Using an already made toy is not necessarily a pursuit any less active or creative than making a toy of one’s own, Bowen emphasizes. Toys need not be used for the purpose for which they were designed, and children can “remake” them physically or imaginatively. Mechanical toys, for example, are “champion breakers-down; but fun, after that point, to take to pieces” (182). Bowen’s only worry is that certain toys may endanger children’s ability to remake and use them as they see fit. Newer toys, she notes, have shown a change in emphasis, moving from “mechanical realism” (as shown in dolls with eyes that shut, fingers that bend, hair that looks real) to “psychological realism” (as shown in dolls with pensive-looking faces that suggest emotional depth). Realism of either kind, Bowen argues, is necessary to a degree, yet too much of it threatens to stifle play and prescribe how children must use their toys. Flexibility of use is necessary to ensure a real connection between the child and the toy, one that can alter a child’s future connections

with the material world: “Shall we not always love, above what is made already, that which we can make into something else?” (182).

The mutability of the toy has given it a central role in the discourse of thing theory. In the article “How to Do Things with Things,” Brown introduces the crucial concept of “reobjectification” through an examination of the “eerie mutant” toys owned by neighbor Sid in Disney’s *Toy Story*. These toys, hybrids of doll heads and robot claws (among other combinations), are “captivating, and captivating because the awkward, curious composites are the things that materialize an otherwise unexpressed wish to transfigure things as they are” (964). Both overwhelmingly material and tools for the imagination, toys merge consumption with creation. Barbara Johnson considers the recent ubiquity of Transformers toys, from their introduction in the 1980s to their newfound popularity from the film series, as a paradigm of the toy’s ability to alter material reality: “What was mesmerizing about them was the use of exactly the same materials to produce a living thing or a machine...under the spell of shape-changing, anything can become anything at any moment” (5). While toys may promise that “anything can be anything,” however, their very materiality must provide some limits to imagination. The Optimus Prime Transformer can be treated as a truck or a robot, but probably not something completely different, like a table or a cat. As Susan Stewart memorably puts it, toys “test the relation between materiality and meaning”—that is, in their status as material objects that move us to create fictions, they help us define the limits of our ability to shape material reality to suit our fancy (57).

In presenting the toy as a key example of the distinction between an object and a thing, and in embracing the toy as a model for engaging creatively with things, contemporary thing theorists draw on prior celebrations of children's toys. Charles Baudelaire, in "The Philosophy of Toys," decries those children who "do not make use of their toys, but save them up, range them in order, make libraries and museums of them"—appreciating the toys as classifiable objects, made for one particular purpose, rather than more mysterious and exciting *things* to be explored. He reports being heartened by "most" children's attempt to "get at and *see the soul* of their toys," even if they often end the toy's "life" in the process. This tendency accounts for the child's "first metaphysical stirring," for in trying to account for the uncanny life of the toy, the child shows an interest in the origins of life or being itself. Baudelaire claims that while "children in general act upon their toys," imposing their will on them, the "toy can sometimes act upon the child," forming in him or her an appreciation for beauty and artistic creation (4).

While many discussions of toys associate the playthings with freedom and creativity, others emphasize the tension between freedom and restraint, noting that toys are part of the social world and not just innocent tools of children's imaginations. The restrictions on what children's toys can be and do come not only from their material limitations but also from another source—their parents. Walter Benjamin separates the concept of the toy from the concept of play, arguing that toys register adults' hopes and expectations for children: "For who gives the child his toys if not adults?" (118). Many toys are introduced to ease children into adulthood: baby dolls for girls and tools or toy

soldiers for boys are often intended to instill in them the wish to become men and women like their parents. As Benjamin notes, a “child is no Robinson Crusoe,” cut off from society (116). The child can still attempt to reconcile his or her own desires with the expectations of adults, sometimes by pretending that the toy is something else. Therefore, “for the child at play, the doll is sometimes big and sometimes little,” depending on the child’s wishes (118). This tension between the child’s freedom to imagine and the limits imposed on that freedom is often displaced onto the toy itself. In an investigation into toy narratives from *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Pinocchio* to *Toy Story*, Susan Honeyman shows that stories of toys that come to life frequently center on negotiations between the limits of the material and the toy’s ability to exercise free will. The main characters struggle to make choices, not to be “just” a stuffed toy or puppet or cowboy doll (117). This central conflict, Honeyman writes, appeals to the child’s own nascent struggle to assert his or her own will in the face of the demands of parents, teachers, and other adults.⁵

Bowen’s novel *The House in Paris* (1935) uses toys to dramatize both children’s navigation of the demands of the adult world and their testing out of the boundaries between the material world and their imaginations. *The House in Paris* focuses in large part on two children, Henrietta Mountjoy and Leopold Grant Moody. Henrietta lives in England, Leopold in Italy; both have come for the day to the Paris home of Naomi Fisher, who jokes that her house is becoming a “depot for young people” (6). Like Bowen’s

⁵ See also Lois Kuznets’s *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphoses, and Development*, which notes that toys “embody human anxiety about what it means to be ‘real’—an independent subject or self rather than an object or other submitting to the gaze of more powerfully real and potentially rejecting live beings” (2).

other child characters (and most of her adult characters), Henrietta is unmoored from family connections; her parents have both died, and she lives with a grandmother who rarely pays much attention to her. Born as the result of an affair between Naomi's fiancé Max and her best friend Karen, Leopold similarly lacks close family ties. His father died by suicide before he was born, and his mother gave him up for adoption. Leopold has lived with doting surrogate parents in La Spezia, but pines for his mother and has been brought to Naomi's home to meet her.

Brought to a new city far from home, given little choice about where to go and what to do, the children are intimidated by what they see—by the strange people and, especially, the unfamiliar and seemingly hostile houses and things. On her way to Naomi's, Henrietta (whose point of view carries most of the story) is “oppressed” by the “indifferent streets and early-morning faces” of Paris (4). The Fisher home seems especially unapproachable, with grilles on the windows that “looked ready for an immediate attack”; the other houses on the street look “faded, crazy or sad” (9). Henrietta senses that the inside of the house is “antagonistic, as though it had been invented to put her out” and feels that the “objects did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each with what amounted to its aggressive cry” (11). Despite the forbidding nature of the things, Henrietta and Leopold have little choice but to while away their time watching the table and chairs. They may play with each other, but have been given strict instructions not to speak about forbidden topics, like Leopold's mother and family history. The felt presence of Naomi's elderly mother—the fearsome, ailing Mrs. Fisher—in a room upstairs also limits their ability to interact, make noise, and disturb things.

Into this place of threatening things, Henrietta brings her one childish foible—a stuffed monkey, Charles, that she takes everywhere she goes. A “prim” eleven-year-old girl with an “Alice-ish air,” she attempts to approach the world with coldness and common sense. Charles provides her with material comfort and also allows her to negotiate between her desire to remain a child and her fascination with her burgeoning womanhood.⁶ Still, Henrietta struggles to make Charles mean what she wants him to mean, bristling at Naomi’s suggestions that she “plays” with him, and Mrs. Fisher’s joke that Charles can talk. (Indeed, Charles’s prosaic name captures Henrietta’s opposition to flights of fancy.) Henrietta insists that she merely “always seems to take” Charles “about because she ‘like[s] to think he enjoys things’ (4). When Leopold asks if Charles “feels,” Henrietta replies, “Well, I like to think he notices” (18). This subtle distinction between “feeling” and “noticing” allows Henrietta to humanize Charles, but only to a certain extent: by mutely “noticing,” he possesses that type of watchfulness that all things seem to have.

Henrietta’s reaction to others’ assumptions that she “plays” with Charles calls attention to the navigation between public and private space that toys facilitate. As the

⁶ In the autobiographical essay “The Mulberry Tree,” Bowen recalls her adolescent years at boarding school, suggesting that toys allowed the girls to play at being children as they awkwardly transitioned to adulthood. At that time, the “fashion” prompted the girls to keep “childish inanimate pets.” The plush toys served to bridge the gap between girlhood and womanhood, serving both as vehicles for “innocent fetishism” and as a “good way to travesty sentiment” (14). One girl, she recalls, would mock-solemnly insist that others kiss her blue plush elephant—an affectation similar to Sebastian Flyte’s devotion to his teddy bear in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. This semi-sardonic attitude toward childhood things allowed the girls both to prolong their early youth and to distance themselves from it. Playing the child was significant, she writes, because the seriousness of the times caused them to be alternately “violently precious” and “martyrized by [their] own good taste” (17).

“first possession,” the toy is unquestionably the child’s own, and provides a way of making a semi-private realm in the midst of others. As Susan Stewart writes, “the toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, does not” (56). The toy is also a means for social connection, reminding adults of their own childhood days and deflecting them from the subjects that are more difficult to broach. Bowen would continue to suggest that material things, despite their frequent remoteness from human society, might foster a sense of connection or intimacy among people who otherwise feel detached from one another.

Bowen named “two things” that are particularly “terrible in childhood: helplessness (being in other people’s power) and apprehension—the apprehension that something is being concealed from us because it is too bad to be told” (*MT* 111). The children in *The House in Paris* have both entered a house filled with secrets, and spend time with adults unwilling to tell them. Leopold’s entire existence is “scandalous”; in England, “no one knows” that he has even been born (*HP* 54). His adoptive parents note in a letter to Naomi that “almost any fact” Karen “might mention” about Leopold’s coming into the world “seems to us still unsuitable”; the boy “has not yet received direct sex-instruction,” and nearly any account of his coming to be would require acknowledging the existence of sex—the dirty secret of how all people come to be (32).⁷

⁷ Maria DiBattista calls attention to a particularly striking, strangely worded sentence in *The House in Paris* about Leopold’s existence: “To have been born became to be on the scale of emperors and popes, to be conspicuous everywhere, like the startling white Vittorio Emmanuele monument” (*HP* 23). DiBattista suggests that a “phrase as oddly constructed as ‘to have been born became to be’” shows that “Bowen seeks to alert us that Leopold is bewildered by the grammar of being itself” (223). Leopold’s questions

As Phyllis Lassner notes, the death or other loss of a parent in Bowen's work prompts children to "ask disconcerting questions about their place and personhood in the private, often-secret world of adults. Unanswered, these questions point to the unknowable core of each person's character and forevermore make the world a precarious place" (44).

Though Henrietta makes Charles into what she wants him to be, she also likens herself to the toy. Both she and Leopold seem attracted to objects in part because they feel like burdens or forgotten things. Henrietta thinks of children as "people's belongings" (55). As Leopold and Henrietta grow acquainted in the living room, he becomes "his own rocking toy," bobbing back and forth (18). That both Henrietta and Leopold might be considered belongings is made especially clear in the conclusion of the novel. Though Leopold's mother Karen does not come to meet him, Karen's husband Ray eventually comes to the house. Though the meeting is strained at first, Ray ultimately chooses to "steal" the boy away, bringing him to his home with Karen; the novel ends with them at the train station, having just seen Henrietta off, about to embark on their new life together. Leopold goes with Ray willingly—and has often dreamed of being "claimed" by his mother—but his doting adoptive parents will likely be stunned and heartbroken. ("They keep trying to make me be things," Leopold complains of his family in Italy and their hopes for him [229].) On leaving the house with Leopold, Ray feels a sudden, odd twinge of remorse when Naomi presents him with Leopold's suitcase, saying that he "somehow stick[s] at making off with his clothes, on top of everything else" (257). This strange objection underlines children's status as possessions: Leopold

about his own history—the way he came to be—as well as his interest in touching and exploring things show this fascination and bewilderment with being.

can be “stolen,” like a thing, and his own possessions truly belong not to him but to his guardians.

Patrick Moran points out that in addition to comparing Henrietta and Leopold to playthings, Bowen often likens characters to dolls or marionettes. Moran suggests that this motif of the character as doll or toy shows Bowen’s acknowledgement of the artificiality of her fictional world, a way of “testing the limits of her own realist practice” (154). Her characterization of people as marionettes suggests that her works are not meant simply as a mirror of society but as something more consciously constructed and fungible. Noting that these characters seem alternately like fully fleshed, deeply thoughtful beings and like automata, Moran suggests that Bowen presents the characters for herself as author and us as readers to “play with,” as we consider them from multiple angles (172).

While Henrietta and Leopold may think of themselves as things—and Bowen’s comparisons point to the shaky divide between the human world and the material world—the children are also attracted to things that defy identification and interpretation. While some of these things are forbidding and scary, others delight the children in their very impenetrability. The objects that fascinate them are as foreign as the adult world, but these they can study for as long as they would like without being turned away or told to play elsewhere. In her luggage, Henrietta carries a postcard of the Trocadero and a copy of *The Strand* magazine, both of which she associates with exoticism and sophistication. Leopold is captivated by the magazine, poring over its contents “as though he had England here” and “perplexed” by the “veil of foreign sentiment” on every page (28).

They associate these items with maturity; both also marvel at the strangeness of the purses wielded by grown women, with all of their secrets contained inside. Though Henrietta and Leopold may imagine that this estrangement from things will dissipate once they become older, Bowen's treatment of adolescence and young adults makes clear that the strangeness of things will not disappear.

Adolescents, Lost in the Grand Estate

Bowen was writing at a time in which the meaning of childhood was very much in flux, and relationships between adults and children were changing. As Martin Pugh notes in his social history of interwar Britain, people were becoming "increasingly willing to recognize childhood as a distinct stage in human development" (196). The recognition that children represented a special type of person led to special protections for them. Legislation such as the Children's Act of 1908 and the Children and Young Person's Act of 1933 helped to establish the concept of "child abuse" and set out ways in which juvenile offenders should be treated differently from adults; debates also raged, throughout the twenties and thirties, about extending the age of compulsory schooling past the age of eleven (Hendrick 82). Children's new status in the eyes of the law correlated to a new status in family members' eyes. The fact that families were becoming smaller led to closer relationships between parents and each of their children (Pugh 197). Robert Graves and Alan Hodge professed that the "Twenties were a great time for well-to-do children—never before had such attention been lavished on them nor parental control been so light" (198).

If childhood was treated more and more as a specific category or stage, the change was not instantaneous, and there was still plenty of uncertainty about the exact border between childhood and adulthood. Legislation defined the end of childhood first at fourteen, then at sixteen. The 1920s media fascination with youth culture and the “bright young people” points also to the nascent category of the teenager. (Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the first usage of the word “teenage” in 1921, although the term was chiefly American at the time.) Sally Mitchell argues that the new category of the adolescent had a particularly pronounced effect on girls and young women, who were more sexualized (and had more knowledge about sex) than girls in generations past (75–80). They had more access to schooling than their mothers and grandmothers, and these additional school years also influenced the development of a middle age group. This shifting status of the child and adolescent makes these young people models in Bowen’s work for the uncertain status of the thirties society as a whole.

If Bowen’s children use toys as a way of engaging with the threatening world of adults and forbidding things, her adolescent characters are denied even this comfort. In Bowen’s thirties novels, the adolescent simultaneously is ignored by others and serves as an emblem of the confusion of the decade. Herself an adolescent during the Great War, Bowen noted that the whole world “seemed to be bound up in a tragic attack of adolescence” at the time and that to her and other schoolgirls, the “whole world’s behavior seemed to be travestying our own” (*MT* 17). Interestingly, other thirties writers made this same association of adolescence with life during the First World War. Henry Green, in the memoir *Pack My Bag*, compares his school life to Britain as a whole in the

First World War: “When war was declared our hysteria became a fair copy of what could be found outside of the grounds [of the school] only larger, we displayed it in purer form” (39). While Bowen’s (and Green’s) novels take place after the war, they depict a world that is still unsettled and “adolescent.”

In *The Death of the Heart* (1938), Bowen’s narrator comments, “In the house of today there is no place for the miss: she must sink or swim” (42). The novel describes life at the Quayne estate in London after Portia, the sixteen-year-old “miss,” has been sent to live with her half-brother Thomas and his wife Anna following the deaths of both her mother and father. As in Leopold’s case, the conditions of Portia’s birth were unseemly, and some relatives do not know of her existence. She is the result of Thomas’s father’s affair with a much younger woman, and Anna is reminded of “an old chap’s pitiful sexuality” every time she looks at Portia. Anna is twenty-nine, the *châtelaine* of a well-appointed estate and at the center of a circle of friends; one might wonder why a young, mousy girl in need of a home has such ability to unnerve her. Anna herself seems to recognize the absurdity of her distaste for Portia while continuing to exonerate herself for her feelings, calling the girl a “monster.” Her friend St. Quentin Miller also notices the unsettling way in which Portia “fixes” him with her eyes and forms an “alarmsing vague little smile, already not quite childish” (28).

Bowen’s other interwar novels also include older characters with a seemingly misplaced discomfort around—and perhaps even contempt for—rootless, orphaned adolescents. In *The Last September* (1929), the visiting Montmorencys note with dismay that Lois Farquar, ten years old when they saw her last, has become nearly grown; they

“prefer children” (4). In *To the North* (1932), the lovers Julian Temple and Cecilia Summers are unnerved by Julian’s niece Pauline. An orphan in a wealthy, busy family, Pauline has relations who pay for her to have the best of everything, but all of them ultimately keep their distance from her. Increasingly, Julian’s sisters and brothers pressure him to allow her to stay with him on vacations from her boarding school, in the hopes that the new responsibility will cause the thirty-nine-year-old bachelor to settle down. Aware of her placelessness and seeming superfluity, Pauline is nervous—Cecilia repeatedly refers to her as “rabbitlike”—and painfully self-conscious. Julian is “mortified” by the “woman so drearily nascent in her immaturity,” concluding that she is at a “difficult age” (54). Cecilia, more blunt, notes that “it’s bad enough being a woman...but I can’t think why girls of that age were ever born!” (112). Bowen suggests that these adolescent characters’ disorientation and obvious vulnerability bothers others because it reminds them of their own insecurities and suspended adolescence. She describes the young people of Cecilia and Julian’s acquaintance as “perpetual adolescents” (146), and notes a confrontation between Emmeline Summers and her secretary, a girl with the “juices of an unduly prolonged adolescence” still “fermenting” despite the fact that she is apparently an adult (169).

The idea that something has tampered with the usual growth of an adolescent into adulthood allows Bowen to both borrow from and alter the traditions of the Bildungsroman and the inheritance narrative. Jed Esty writes of Bowen’s adoption and transformation of Bildungsroman tropes in *The Last September*, expanding on Hermione Lee’s earlier observation that most of Bowen’s characters, regardless of age, can be

considered “retarded overgrown juveniles.” The novel focuses on Lois Farquar, an Anglo-Irish young woman who “revolts...against the expectation of adulthood itself” (261). Esty likens Lois’s stalled development to the predicament of the Anglo-Irish settlers in 1920 (the year in which the novel is set), a class with no clear future or place but a desire to keep things as they are for as long as possible. The tension between the inevitable future and the desire to mangle in the safer past generates a conflict in the style of the novel, as Esty claims: “the figurative and descriptive language describes a lyrical interlude in the onrush of historical and biographical time, an interlude whose narrative correlate is the plot of arrested development” (260). Though violent and disruptive events happen throughout the novel, most are only recounted secondhand, and the narration often takes a slow, deliberative pace.

Material things register this tension between stability and change, and they foster the desire of Lois and others to linger in the past. The things promise to remain through the passage of time—and the description of these objects does, as Esty suggests, “arrest” the onrush of the plot. Lois and the Naylor (her aunt and uncle), who raised her after her mother’s death, live amidst massive and decisive-looking furnishings in an estate called Danielstown. Around the dinner table, Lois and the others seem “in the air of the room unconvincingly painted, startled, transitory.” Portraits of their ancestors above, however, are described as “immutable figures” that “canceled time, negated personality, and made of the lower cheerfulness, dining and talking, the faintest exterior friction” (28). These monumental objects, along with a fear of the future, lead the characters to aspire to the condition of things. Lois marvels at both the Naylor and their things for the

“magnetism they all exercised by being static” (244). Several times, she thinks of (and admires) people who seem almost inanimate, with their lives suspended: as she waits outside the Danielstown home, she thinks of the people in the house as being “sealed up...like flowers in a paperweight” (41–42). Gerald Lesworth, an army subaltern and suitor who seems to be a fixture in Lois’s life, “might have been sealed up permanently in tin, like a lobster” (214). Though Lois seems to find these thoughts comforting, both of the unsettling images compare people to dead things, preserved and, in the case of the flower, given the illusion of continued life.

Carmen Concilio suggests that this continual comparison of people to things leads Bowen to use objects to “replace the unspoken words by revealing the protagonists’ emotions and passions through an epiphany” (282). This “interior language,” she suggests, “animate[s]” the things and allows them to “speak” (287). Yet while the people often identify with the estate furnishings, they are just as frequently befuddled by them, viewing them as alien or other. Several things—a gramophone, a pail, a book—break or go missing. Though they seem always to have been part of the Danielstown estate, many of the furnishings clearly derive from other, “exotic” places. There is a “troop of ebony elephants” permanently on “parade” on the bookshelves (7). A tiger rug stretches across the floor. These things may, as Concilio suggests, seem to have a kind of half-life, but it is not necessarily a life given to them by the characters. The strange things, all “brought back...by someone [Lois] did not remember,” not only come from elsewhere; they seem permanently in the midst of an uncompleted action. As Lois goes to her room at night she “often tripped with her toe in the jaws of a tiger; a false step at any time sent some great

claw skidding over the polish. Pale regimental groups, reunions a generation ago of the family or neighborhood, gave out from the walls a vague depression” (7). The things are remote from Lois and from the others. Their uncanny suggestion of life or suspended movement comes partly from the things themselves—from their ontological difference from people—and partly from the traces of past generations (now long dead) that they preserve.

In *The Last September* and in other works, Bowen suggests that this feeling of remoteness from things has become especially pronounced for Lois and her generation. She explores the attachment of the Victorian woman to the things of the house in *The House in Paris*, in a flashback section showing Karen and Naomi on the verge of marriage as young women. Karen, on a visit to her Uncle Bill and ailing Aunt Violet, notes all of the “brass things” arrayed throughout the home, making the rooms seem “at a sacred standstill.” Aunt Violet manages the estate and imbues the things with her presence, and Karen can imagine Uncle Bill saying, “I have touched nothing since my dear wife’s death” (77). The idea of allowing one’s presence to emanate through a home is tempting: Karen sees that women marry to “keep up the fiction of being at the hub of things,” an expression that can be interpreted both literally and figuratively (76).

For Karen’s generation, marriage is no longer a given, and no longer the only source of fulfillment for women. Karen is shocked to find that Aunt Violet is unsatisfied with her life, even though she has satisfied so many others.⁸ Karen herself resists her

⁸ Bowen frequently refers to these new opportunities facing women. As Wendy Parkins suggests, her female characters are becoming increasingly mobile, in strong contrast with the “apparent immobility of male characters” (83). While Bowen’s women work in travel

engagement to the steady, dependable Ray, a man who looks like “any of these tall Englishmen who stand back in train corridors unobtrusively to let foreigners pass” (239). Instead, she follows her irresistible attraction to Naomi’s fiancé Max, a man of uncertain roots and nationality. Every part of Max’s identity is impossible to pin down. Described as “either French or Jewish” (111), he has a “manly steadiness” combined with a “darting womanish quality,” and even his age is not discernible: Karen observes that he “must be thirty-two, but still looked...some special age of his own” (110).⁹ A woman who “spent her tips on antiques” as a young child, Karen is initially reassured by the stable, concrete furnishings she sees in the windows of department stores as she prepares for her marriage to Ray. “Tables and chairs have their period, four legs, and their price,” she thinks. “They are more than visionary.” As thoughts of Max take over, however, Karen feels she is “whipping a pistol out of a kid bag and firing at the sofa through the glass” (133). An impulsive phone call leads to a meeting between the lovers; in short order, Karen becomes pregnant, a confrontation with Mrs. Fisher drives Max to suicide, and Karen’s mother dies of strain and grief. There can be, finally, no stability for these characters, or only a veneer of stability with cracks underneath. Ray agrees to wed Karen and keep the child a secret, but he relinquishes high-profile career opportunities that could lead to

agencies, love trains, or move to Canada or America, the men in her novels frequently fear automobiles or dream of settling down.

⁹ Despite his own estrangement from his roots, Max also pursues his marriage because he desires steadiness and stability—and, also like Karen, he associates that stability with things (particularly furniture). He tells Karen that he proposed to Naomi impulsively, after “seeing how gently” she picked up a pair of scissors from the floor and “remember[ing] that she was a woman” (178). He sees Naomi as “furniture or the dark”—not striking or exciting, but there when he needs her (200).

scrutiny of Karen's past. Leopold's existence forms an unspoken tension between them, as they eye warily any "third chair" at a table they both share (246).

The damage done to the "hub of things" a married woman used to occupy shows in the way Karen and Naomi's generation handles objects. Karen's mother is "not of the generation that fingers things on a mantelpiece," and her home is that of a "pre-war novel" (187, 68).¹⁰ But most of Bowen's characters do not approach things in the commonsensical way that Mrs. Michaelis does. In *The House in Paris* alone, Karen, Naomi, Max, Ray, Henrietta, and Leopold all have a habit of nervously touching things. Leopold swings Henrietta's briefcase, sending its contents flying and causing apples to fall on the floor. When Henrietta tells Mrs. Fisher of the occurrence, Mrs. Fisher says knowingly, "Ah! He likes to touch things?" (44). Naomi "plays with" her gloves when they are left on the table (114). Max constantly touches objects—"the stem of a glass, a salt spoon, a cigarette"—as he talks (112). Ray's uneasiness at the Fisher home in the present day, when he comes to meet Leopold, causes him to drop and break an antique ceramic lid that Naomi has set out for him as an ashtray. Similar examples can be found in all of Bowen's interwar works.

The disjunction between generations, the new instability, is revealed partly by the younger generations' inability or refusal to procreate, disrupting the normal generational process and the process of inheritance. The adults in *The Death of the Heart*, *The Last September*, and *To the North* do not have children of their own; as some critics have

¹⁰ As Shannon Wells-Lassagne has suggested, Bowen's reference to the pre-war novel serves as a reminder that Bowen is not merely a realist novelist (107). The reference suggests that while the home and character of Mrs. Michaelis reinforce realist conventions, other parts of the novel challenge or undermine those conventions.

suggested, children in Bowen's work are typically born by accident and out of wedlock (Jordan 61). Anna and Thomas's marriage, in *The Death of the Heart*, has been plagued by multiple miscarriages; the couple has earned the pity of their friends, but decides that they are happier without children. Throughout *The Last September*, especially, characters express concern about the perceived unlikelihood of the young generation procreating. Lois's cousin Laurence, an undergraduate, is "so modern he is not interested in girls" and spends his days reading and thinking about writing a novel (but not actually writing much of anything). He asks Hugo Montmorency, "Do you ever notice this country? Doesn't sex seem irrelevant?" Flustered, Hugo responds that there seem to be "a great many unmarried women" (56). Lois becomes engaged to Gerald, but she does not reciprocate his intense devotion to her. The engagement is broken off, and shortly afterward Gerald is shot and killed in a skirmish. Rather than marrying Gerald (before he dies, of course), Lois ponders various nonprocreative, ultimately doomed romantic possibilities: a brief crush on Hugo, the married, middle-aged houseguest; a fascination with Marda Norton, an older girl staying at the house, that has led some critics to explore signs of Lois's latent homosexuality.¹¹ Marda herself has broken off engagements in the past; she announces a new engagement, which everyone expects will be broken off in time. The Montmorencys' marriage is childless, and Marda says about Hugo, "He couldn't be anyone's father" (186).

¹¹ Elizabeth Cullingford, for example, notes that Lois "is eager to explore the world with another woman, to look away from or behind the heteronormative model of the Holy Family." Cullingford also refers to Laurence as Lois's "gay cousin," offering as evidence the remark about his not being interested in girls as well as his warm friendly relationships with several male characters (299).

The childlessness of Bowen's characters is strongly tied to worries about social degradation and impending violence. It reflects a pervasive fear at the time of Bowen's writing about a declining birthrate in Britain, and the survival of British culture and society. Between 1860 and 1940, the average number of children per married woman in Britain decreased from 5.8 to 2.2. This decline in the birthrate was often associated with a larger sense of social decline growing throughout the thirties. Women's magazines insinuated that having children was the only path to genuine fulfillment, and an alarmist 1934 book warned of the *Twilight of Parenthood* (Soloway 232). Issues of population and childlessness were a major part of debates about birth control and eugenics, as some warned that the supposed decline of the British race was a result of undesirable populations breeding too rapidly while desirable populations had too few children (Szreter 17).

The tenuous relationships of Bowen's adolescent characters to the people around them, who are not their birth parents, lead them to have a shaky and tenuous relationship with things. They feel that they do not possess anything, but are nonetheless fascinated by the opacity of material things and look on these things as anchors. As Bowen wrote in a later preface to *The Last September*, Lois is the "niece always, never [the] child, of that house," just as she is the niece of the Naylor (MT 126). This sort of construction is fairly common in Bowen's works; she writes, for example, of Emmeline as the "*stepchild*"—not the *child*—"of an uneasy century" (TN 89, emphasis added). Making Lois the niece of the house complicates her relationship to the place and the things contained within, just as it complicates her relationship with the Naylor. This concern about legacies shows in

the perennial theme of inheritance in Bowen's novels. Maria DiBattista writes of this preoccupation, "the modernist determination to make everything, including human relationships, new was often baffled by the question of who would inherit their vision of a transformed humanity and ensure that it would survive the tumult and hazards of change" (220). As DiBattista suggests, Bowen uses inheritance in both a metaphorical and an emphatically physical way, to ask both how children and adolescents will navigate the society in which they have grown and what, exactly, they will do with the sheer plenitude of *stuff*—sometimes strange and baffling—left over from past generations.¹²

Death, the Future, and "Imperturbable Things"

Questions about the future are particularly pressing in Bowen's work because of her concern over whether there will be much of a future at all. She peppers her novels with seemingly innocuous parlor chit-chat about the possible demise of civilization. In *The Last September*, people remark over tea and at tennis, "It's all very well to talk of disintegration; of course there's a great deal of disintegration in England and on the Continent. But one does wonder sometimes whether there's really much there to disintegrate" (31). In *To the North*, the aging social doyenne Lady Waters notes that while "all ages are restless," the current one is "far more than restless: it is decentralized. From week to week, there is no knowing where anyone is" (230). This kind of restlessness and decentralization will eventually, the novel suggests, lead to destruction.

¹² Bowen would grapple with the idea of inheritance and what it meant in her own life, after the family estate passed to her after going through generations of fathers and sons. She noted in *Bowen's Court*, "I was the first woman heir; already I had changed my father's name for my husband's. We had no children" (448). Bowen's gender and childlessness made her a nontraditional heir, but one who might preserve the estate and the things within it in a new way—as she did by designating herself the family historian.

Cecilia muses, in a letter to Julian, that “when old men like Sir Robert [Lady Waters’s husband] are dead, our civilization will go—don’t you think?” (237).

These fears of the end of civilization and the splintering of human society lead people to embrace things as a source of solace, even as they seem, at times, barely able to believe that things have solidity and weight. People marvel at the feeling of a house empty of people, filled with just the barely discernible presence of things. Staying at Julian’s flat as someone in between a guest and a daughter, Pauline nearly disappears into her surroundings: “The room with its bunch of shadowy furniture became full of vacancy, in which Pauline hardly seemed to exist” (*TN* 60). Cecilia and Julian meet to talk in a mostly abandoned room, left empty for weeks, in a friend’s estate, but are taken aback by the atmosphere they find there. Their presence seems “superfluous and embarrassing in this solid and foul drawing room which out of weeks of oblivion and shut-up silence had crystallized round its objects—brass bowls, the piano, a tall screen painted with lilies—a sardonic indifference to their company” (225). Portia returns to the Quayne estate after a vacation, before the arrival of Anna and Thomas, to find it empty save for the housekeeper Matchett. A haven of “immaculate emptiness,” the home “offer[s] that ideal mould for living into which life so seldom pours itself...Portia—softly opening door after door, looking all round rooms with her reflecting dark eyes, glancing at each clock, eyeing each telephone—did not count as a presence.” Still, her moving through the house shows the fragility of this purity of things, preserved from human meddling: “Yes, already, with every breath that passed through the house, pollution was beginning” (229).

This hunger for a pure thing, untouched by human presence, shows a recognition of the definite otherness of things, and of their resistance to human understanding. Yet the thing uncontaminated by human presence serves a deeply human need. “After inside upheavals, it is important to fix on imperturbable *things*,” argues Bowen’s narrator, before making this strange comment: “the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the spirit than the destruction of human life.”¹³ Things, in their “imperturbableness, this air that nothing has happened...remind us how exceedingly seldom the unseemly or unforeseeable rears its head” (207). Despite her estrangement from Anna and Thomas, Portia can take comfort in the solid, static chairs and tables—even if these things, too, make her feel that she does not belong.

The Last September actually ends in the destruction of the seemingly indestructible furnishings in the Danielstown estate, a fiery end that several of the characters anticipate with mixed satisfaction. The seeming suspension of time in these things eventually makes Lois wary that they somehow contain or fossilize past moments or people, that through the things the prior inhabitants of their homes will exert a powerful though unseen pressure on her behavior and choices. Sitting in Marda’s room, she notices the “mottled carpet curled [with] strange pink fronds: someone dead now, buying the carpet, had responded to an idea of beauty.” The persistence of the carpet, grown faded with age, leads her to wish that “instead of bleaching to dust in summers of

¹³ Bowen’s narrator echoes a sentiment Bowen herself expressed in a 1940 letter to Virginia Woolf, which I have used as an epigraph for this chapter: “When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too? All my life I have said, ‘Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs’—and what a mistake” (*MT* 216–17). Bowen wrote the letter after hearing about the destruction of Woolf’s flat by a bomb.

empty sunshine, the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night” (141). Lois alternates between her desire for things to stay the same and her feeling that these things threaten her, which leads her sometimes to desire drastic, sudden destruction. Laurence shares this desire, mentioning that he should “like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual...I should like to be here when this house burns” (58). Laurence and Lois’s wish is fulfilled: though the novel begins with the family and guests laughing about the prospect of guns buried in the fields, it ends with the house burning to the ground just three months later.

While this ending reminds readers that even solid, seemingly indestructible things can break or perish, Bowen’s other works emphasize the way things outlast their possessors and creators—preserving, forever, that “idea of beauty” to which “someone dead now” had responded. The longevity of the thing leads Bowen frequently to associate things with death. When Eddie sees the nearly empty house while Portia, Anna, and Thomas are away, he describes thinking (with his flair for the dramatic) that “your corpses must be laid out in the drawing-room...Everything really had a charnel echo and I said to myself, ‘She died young’” (*DH* 151). The unpublished short story “Salon des Dames” details a genteel hotel that seems like each of the hundred rooms “might have held a corpse rotting in humidity beneath the glacial swathings of the bed. In the lounge, a mist perpetually filmed the mirrors; the wicker armchairs gathering sociably around the glass-topped tables creaked at one another in the silence, so that now and then an apprehensive human head would bob up from over a writing table” (*B* 30).

The ambiguous comfort of a world persisting beyond the death of humans or human society persists today, as evidenced by Alan Weisman's recent book *The World Without Us*. In it, the author describes as a "thought experiment" inviting readers to "picture a world from which we all vanished. Tomorrow" (5). If humans became extinct, he asks, what would the Earth look like? Would nature revert to an earlier state? Would human monuments and artworks be preserved? Years after the disappearance of humans, "might we have left some faint, enduring mark on the universe; some lasting glow, or echo, of earthly humanity; some interplanetary sign that once we were here?" (6). Weisman's image of a world without humans, like Bowen's references to such a place, both yearns for a place free of people and longs for proof that humans will not simply fade away. Weisman's book draws upon contemporary fears of environmental dangers, global pandemics, and war, terrorism, and other violence. While such apocalyptic thought is present in many time periods, interwar Britain was particularly fraught with anxiety.

Though the threat of cataclysmic, world-destroying events always lingers, many of Bowen's novels and short stories also dwell on the aftereffects of smaller, more localized tragedies, which nonetheless loom large for those affected by them. Several novels and short stories recount the fallout from deaths and violent crimes that occurred in the past; in others, such events happen during breaks or "gashes" in the text, and characters hear about them later (Ellmann 85). They take place largely in drawing rooms and around kitchen tables which present a fiction of stability and continuity, with change

and violence lurking beneath the surface.¹⁴ In many of these stories, people are unnerved by the things that remain after strange and violent events, wondering at the things' continued existence amidst such upheaval and curious of any remaining traces of these events lurking in the things. In the story "The Cat Jumps," for example, a self-professedly commonsensical, scientifically minded couple buys a home in which an especially grisly murder has taken place—a home many others have avoided buying due to its violent past. The couple prides themselves on their freedom from superstition and recounts the details of the crime to their friends, including the dismembered corpse with its heart in a hatbox and other parts strewn throughout the house. Despite the conviction that the house's past does not shake them, the perceived traces of the crime cause them to fear each other. By the end the normally stolid wife has fainted and subsequently locked herself in a room to get away from her husband, terrified that the house will drive him to kill her. Stories such as this one, with its gathering dread and attention to the uncanniness of a particular place, have caused some to refer to Bowen as a gothic writer, though nothing truly supernatural ever happens in her stories.¹⁵ They merely reveal the seeming otherworldliness of the

¹⁴ *The House in Paris*, for example, has three parts—"The Present," "The Past," and "The Present"—reflecting this feeling of belatedness, of being always *after*. The first part ends with the revelation that Leopold's mother Karen will not be coming as promised; as a result, Henrietta will "date, from that afternoon, the belief that nothing ever happens" (213). Yet she has heard the stories about Leopold's scandalous birth; apparently, at some point, something has happened and changed. Henrietta looks at the furnishings to discover traces of the past events: "Henrietta, eyeing the bar-like stripes of the paper, felt a house like this was too small for so much to happen in" (51).

¹⁵ See, for example, Phyllis Lassner and Paula Derdiger as well as entries for Bowen in the Blackwell anthology *The Gothic*, ed. David Punter and Glennis Byron and *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy. Lis Christensen's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction* analyzes gothic elements of postwar Bowen novels such as *Two Little Girls* and *Eva Trout*.

furniture that surrounds us every day, and the seeming persistence of the past through the things.

Critics often point to *The Death of the Heart* as Bowen's most coherent statement about the relationship between the present and the past, and the necessity to keep the past alive through things. Matchett, a housekeeper who has taken care of the estate since before Thomas was born, is typically treated as the moral center of the novel. A gothic, ghostly presence, Matchett has a face that shows a "monklike impassivity," and she has the body of a "fragile Regency pillar" (23). In many ways, her depiction recalls that of Mrs. Avery in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, the ghostly woman who watches over the Howards End estate and the furnishings inside it until Margaret Schlegel returns to restore life to the things. Matchett tells Portia that she has stayed at the estate not because of her loyalty to the Quaynes but because of her loyalty to the furniture: "The things that came to them here from Mrs. Quayne's were accustomed to the best care....I hadn't the heart...to let that furniture go: I wouldn't have known myself." The housekeeper is pained by her struggles to keep the furnishings in order after Anna has rearranged them, exclaiming, "My goodness, when I got here and saw all Mrs. Quayne's stuff where Mrs. Thomas had put it—if I'd have been a silly, I should have said it gave me quite a look." The placement of furniture in its proper place, she thinks, bespeaks a commitment to proper social order, a continuation of past values: "Unnatural living runs in a family, and the furniture knows it, you be sure. Good furniture knows what's what. It knows it's made for a purpose, and it respects itself—when I say you're made for a purpose you

start off crying. Oh, furniture like we've got is too much for some that would rather not have the past" (81).

Anna and Matchett frequently engage in battles over the furnishings, with Anna organizing them in different ways than Mrs. Quayne (Thomas's mother) might have liked. The only servant who takes "suggestions" rather than "orders" from Anna, Matchett "unostentatiously" moves a mirror Anna has purchased to a place where she thinks it fits; Anna "unostentatiously" moves it back (27). Matchett comments that Anna is not concerned with the family history she believes to be contained in the furnishings, and instead concentrates only on the "look" of the things. The differences between the characters go beyond only temperament or philosophy; the two seem brought in from entirely different *types* of novels, different genres.¹⁶ While Matchett is a gothic presence, Anna, who has dabbled in interior decoration and making "satirical drawings," seems like a refugee from an early Waugh novel, a perennially bored and dilettantish bright young person just starting to get older. The characters affect the narration around them, including the descriptions of material things. The following description captures Anna's commitment to fashion and attention to detail: "In the pretty air-tight room with its drawn aquamarine curtains, scrolled sofa, and half-circle of yellow chairs, silk-shaded lamps cast light into the mirrors and on to Samarkand rugs" (26–27). Such attention to detail

¹⁶ In a striking analysis of *The House in Paris*, Shannon Wells-Lassagne notes that different characters are aligned with different genre conventions. Naomi's mother, French and dramatic, is described in "sensationalist" terms; Karen's mother evokes "realism and [the] drawing room comedy"; as Bowen's narrator notes, the family is "living in a prewar novel" (103).

and fashion—to the correct names of furnishings, and how “pretty” they look—does not appear in parts of the novel focalized through Matchett or Portia.

Many critics have suggested that Bowen advocates Matchett’s warning that the past must be preserved through things, and that Bowen merely satirizes Anna. Allyson Booth, for example, writes that in *The Death of the Heart* “furniture represents a compelling past, frightening to those who have merely to witness it without having established any relation with it” (147). Therefore, Matchett honors the furniture, while Anna desires to dispose of it or rearrange it. Maud Ellmann suggests that the “purpose of furniture is to remember” and that Matchett is the furniture’s “spirit” (142). Yet while the book hardly endorses Anna and Thomas’s tight-lipped disregard of both the past and the future, it also implicitly critiques Matchett’s unshakeable resistance to change of any sort.

When critics take Matchett as Bowen’s moral center in the novel, they neglect to consider Portia’s own perspective about the treatment of things. Her transient, rootless life alters her approach to personal possessions and household things. Anna says that living in hotels has led her to become “so unnaturally callous about *objects*—she treats any hat, for instance, like an old envelope. Nothing that’s hers ever seems...to belong to her” (9). This strange treatment of things often leads to embarrassment. In class, Portia is scolded for bringing her purse to her seat, rather than hanging it up as the other girls do—a practice that her teacher, not knowing Portia’s history, refers to as a “hotel habit” (55). Matchett scolds her for keeping her key “loose” in her pocket with her money, and also for giving a hat to a young man who comes to tea rather than allowing a servant to retrieve it. This “callous” treatment of things leads Anna to conclude that Portia does not

have the right to her own property or privacy. Anna says she left a writing desk with a locking flap in Portia's room so that she could "make [Portia] see that I quite meant her to have a life of her own" (9). Portia has, however, lost the key and stuffed the *escritoire* with papers, including "all sorts of things Thomas and I throw away—begging letters, for instance, or quack talks about health." This development allows Anna to feel justified in sifting through the papers and, when she finds it, reading Portia's diary.

While Portia's eccentric treatment of things may simply suggest social ineptitude, it also reveals a certain perspective or philosophy about things. One might say that Portia's approach to things shows less rather than more "callousness about objects" than Anna's does. In neglecting to throw out papers, she seems to recognize that anything might be considered important and deserves to be saved—that seeming junk or detritus might be put to a new purpose, as Bowen has suggested toys might be. Indeed, Portia is not quite past the age of using toys; she has an assortment of teddy bears set up in her room, and eagerly awaits the puzzles that Major Brutt, an old acquaintance of Anna's, sends to her.

Through Portia, Bowen likens the desire to make things into other things—to transfigure material reality, to "test the relation between materiality and meaning" (Stewart 57)—to the task of the writer (and hence to her own project in writing the novel). Portia's inclusive approach to things carries over to her attitude toward life experience, as shown by her diary, which unnerves Anna even more than the stacks of papers do. Observing that the entries seem "not like *writing* at all," she is puzzled by Portia's inclusion of many mundane details, such as accounts of dinners at home even

when no guests come over. After describing the diary to St. Quentin, a novelist, she assures him that Portia “does not seem to think you are a snake in the grass, though she sees a good deal of grass for a snake to be in. There does not seem to be a single thing she misses, and there’s certainly not a thing that she does not misconstruct” (12). When St. Quentin offers that Portia might be “interested in experience for its own sake,” Anna retorts that experience simply “isn’t interesting till it begins to repeat itself—in fact, till it does that, it hardly *is* experience” (11). Anna associates experience (or the urge to record or make sense of experience) with the construction or recognition of patterns, something that is missing from Portia’s diary entries. Like her jumbles of papers and other assorted things in her room, Portia’s writing is not structured by any evident organizing principle. The conversation—especially since it involves the novelist St. Quentin—invites readers to consider what its implications might mean for Bowen’s own project as a writer. Anna’s use of the word *misconstruct* (rather than *misinterpret* or *misconstrue*) to describe Portia’s diary entries points to the active creation of Portia’s diary from the raw material she finds around her—even the boring material, things other than parties and dinner guests. Though the diary is not well-constructed, it represents a desire, at least, to shape experience in some way, to create something from it. Portia’s “saving” of the circulars can also be seen as a first step in making matter meaningful.

Bowen also links creative artistry with the imaginative use of things in *The Last September*, in which the would-be young novelist Laurence launches into a fanciful monologue about what could or should happen to all the lost tennis balls, engagement

rings, and other small marvels people have left behind in the water, on the beaches, and in the woods. He pictures

a small resurrection day, an intimate thingy one, when the woods should give up their tennis balls and the bundles of hay their needles: the beaches all their engagement rings and the rivers their cigarette cases and some watches. The sea's too general an affair of furniture and large boilers, it could wait with the graves for the big day... Last term I dropped a cigarette case into the Cher, from the bridge at Parson's Pleasure. It was a gold one, left over from an uncle, flat and thin and curved, for a not excessive smoker. It was from the days when they wore opera cloaks and mashed, and killed ladies. It was very period, very virginal; I called it Henry James; I loved it. I want to see it rush out of the Cher, very pale, with eyeballs, like in the Tate Gallery. It wants a woman to be interested in a day like that, to organise; perhaps the Virgin Mary? Don't you think, sir? (55–56)

The comic exuberance of the things in the scene Laurence sketches is a far cry from the somber watchfulness of the elephant figurines and portraits of ancestors of the Danielstown estate, which seem merely to wait for the home's human inhabitants to expire before they do. Though Laurence is obviously joking, his comic fantasy delights in the idea of a new life for things, in which they could combine memories of the past with a new world. His vision is playful, focusing on small things that suggest the child's delight in the toy or the miniature, which is possible to hold, admire, and use in new ways. Still, despite the fact that Laurence "authors" this vision, he recognizes that things have an autonomy that can be both delightful and frightening. He calls to mind the duality of things; his appeal to the Virgin Mary, flippancy though it may be, is one example among many of the consideration of objects in spiritual or religious terms. (Similarly, the narrator of *The Death of the Heart*, in describing Matchett's attention to her work, notes that "in big houses in which things are done properly, there is always the religious element" [90].) Laurence's description calls up multiple possibilities for interpreting

objects in Bowen's work: as articles of faith and as small personal trinkets or talismans, but also as entities out of human control, whose resurrection creates a comic picture but also a frightening one.

Laurence's fantasy is notable not only because it brings together, humorously, many approaches to material things, but also because it is one of the few examples of people sharing thoughts about things with others. (He is speaking to Hugo Montmorency at the time.) In most cases, people in Bowen's books feel closest to things, or think the most about things, in private moments. In a few sporadic cases, however, Bowen suggests that in the absence of deeply felt family ties or a cohesive social structure, people might at least share a kind of "intimacy" as a result of sitting on or looking at the same chairs, thinking about the same wall hangings. In *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen describes a social set characterized by "slackish kindness" towards one another (13). Thomas says of his class, "I don't think we get together. We none of us seem to feel very well, and I don't think we want each other to know it... The ironical thing is that everyone else gets their knives into us bourgeoisie on the assumption we're having a good time... They seem to have no idea that we don't much care for ourselves" (94). The intimacy Anna and Thomas share with Portia comes mostly from sharing the same space, from the fact that "they had passed on the same stairs, grasped the same door handles, listened to the same strokes of the same clocks" (149). This same strictly physical intimacy appears in *To the North*, in which Markie Linkwater and his sister live in the same house but on separate floors, with no involvement in each other's lives, only passing each other occasionally on the stairs. Emmeline is fascinated by the food elevator

they share, which brings dinner from the cook to each floor. Bowen would return to the idea of material intimacy in her wartime and postwar works, in which characters are surrounded by rubble, bombed flats, and abandoned possessions. She suggests that taking account of all of the things and using them in a new way might, in a London so devastated by grief, be not only a creative process but also a collaborative one.

Coda: Bowen and World War II

Bowen persisted with her attention to homes, things, children, and adolescents into the years of World War II and afterward, though she increasingly turned to autobiographical and critical writing rather than fiction. In 1942, she published *Bowen's Court*, a personal history of her family's estate. Bowen explained that the tumultuousness of the time prompted her to write the account. She noted in a later afterword,

I was writing (as though it were everlasting) about a home during a time when all homes were threatened and hundreds of thousands of them were being wiped out. I was taking the attachment of people to place as being generic to human life, at a time when the attachment was to be dreaded as a possible source of too much pain. (BC 454)

The Heat of the Day (1949), Bowen's next novel after *The Death of the Heart*, would return to the ideas of inheritance, identifying with places, and the challenge of forging attachments to things. The novel was a long time in coming; as Kristine Miller points out, while Bowen's previous six novels had all been brought out in a matter of eleven years (in which she also published two short story collections), it took her eleven years to write *The Heat of the Day*. (She also brought out a short-story collection, *The Demon Lover*, in 1945.) The book takes place in 1942 London, a place of crisis and transition. Many people have fled the city, leaving fully furnished flats and houses that are cared for by the

lost souls who remain. Bowen's protagonist, Stella Rodney, is one of those "people whom the climate of danger suited" staying on in the city after the beginning of the air raids, among the "campers in rooms of draughty dismantled houses, in corners of fled-from flats" (102). She stays in a series of apartments that are not truly her own, filled with the belongings of prior owners who may never return. Harrison, an unwelcome visitor in love with Stella, takes the furnishings to be an extension of her personality, commenting, "All your things are so pretty...Even this ashtray." Stella responds frostily, "It's not mine...nothing in this flat is" (27).

The war backdrop makes everything contingent and uncertain, and this instability is both worrisome and freeing. Married once before, to a man she divorced who then died, Stella has the same coldness that characterizes Anna and Thomas in *The Death of the Heart*. A stoic cipher, Stella has allowed rumors of her cruelty and infidelity to circulate rather than explain the truth—that it was her husband's unfaithfulness that dissolved the marriage. The casual connections encouraged by the war have led her to a new romance with a man named Robert, wounded in the First World War: "They were the creatures of history, whose coming together was of a nature possible in no other day—the day was inherent in the nature." Because of this tie to tragic events, their love will always be tentative, indefinite; "their time," as Bowen puts it, "sat in the third place at their table" (217).

The idea of the third place at the table recurs throughout the novel. It appears in a description of a later meeting between Stella and Harrison, when Harrison sits in a "third armchair in a room in which normally only two intimate people sit," a "stranded outpost

some way away down the carpet” (142). Bowen’s frequent use of the image of the chair reminds us of the continued existence of furnishings in a world which their owners have left behind. The “dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble” continue to make “their anonymous presence—not as today’s dead but as yesterday’s living—felt through London.” This ghostly presence seems to affect the material world they left behind: “not knowing who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning” (99). Though all of Bowen’s novels articulate the sense that material things have been used (and, perhaps, loved) by others now dead, in ways that can never be known, this sense becomes more widespread in *The Heat of the Day*.

When Stella and Harrison meet again years later, after Robert’s death, he comes to see her in a different flat and again comments on her furnishings (as well as a cat). Stella again comments, “It’s not mine. Nothing in this flat is—either” (355). One might protest that it is hers now—that she is the person living there in the moment, and the flat’s original owners may never return. The furniture stays instead in a third place, a middle place, in between what the previous owners thought of it and what Stella might have been able to do with it, if she had truly been able to make it her own.

Like Bowen’s other works, *The Heat of the Day* is concerned with inheritance. It is one of Bowen’s few novels to feature a close relationship between a parent and his or her own child—Stella and her son Roderick, who comes to the flat on furloughs from army duty. The two are estranged from the rest of the family; most of Stella’s relatives are not mentioned, and the family members on Roderick’s father’s side blame Stella for

the divorce. However, when Stella's cousin Francis dies, he leaves his estate to Roderick. The inheritance is an unexpected gift but also a burden; Robert worries about the strain of "unload[ing] the past on a boy like that" (177). Indeed, Francis had noted that he was leaving the estate to Roderick "in the hope that he may care in his own way to carry on the old tradition" (95), and Roderick frets over the meaning of this instruction. He wonders if commas should appear after the words "care" and "way": "Does he mean, that I'm free to care in any way I like, so long as it's *the* tradition I carry on; or, that so long as I care in the same way he did, I'm free to mean by 'tradition' anything I like?" (95). When Stella visits the home to check up on it while Roderick is still away, she finds that Francis has left notes on nearly everything, stipulating how it should be used and cared for. There are "injunctions, admonitions and warnings...*Clocks*, when and how to wind...*Fire Extinguishers*, when and how to employ...*Locks and Hinges*, my method of oiling" (181). The notes impressively classify and categorize all of the items, but they will stifle Roderick from living in the estate and using or admiring the things in it on his own terms.

Despite his worries, Roderick anchors himself with thoughts of the new estate: "Possessorship of Mount Morris affected Roderick strongly...The house came out to meet his growing capacity for attachment...The house, nonhuman, became the hub of his imaginary life" (50). This reference to the house as a hub recalls Karen's thought, in *The House in Paris*, of the stewardship of a household allowing women to participate in the "fiction of being at the hub of things." In both cases, young adults aspire to "possessorship" as a way of keeping them centered. Stella's unfamiliar new flat, with its

strange objects in odd places, dismays Roderick, and he experiences a moment of panic when he is given a tray to put in “the other room”: “Somewhere between these chairs and tables must run the spoor of habit, could one but pick it up...Roderick, for the moment, was confounded by there being no one right place to put down a tray” (54). A child who “prefer[red] objects or myths to people” (64), Roderick is also bothered by an unfamiliar sofa that “might have been some derelict piece of furniture exposed on a pavement after an air raid or washed up by a flood on some unknown shore” (57). In this strange new place, Roderick cannot simply “pick up” the “spoor of habit” of his home life with his mother on his visits. Both of them note the “absence of any inanimate thing they had in common,” which “set[s] up an undue strain” (57–58).

Despite the anxiety that this absence of familiar surroundings or “habit” creates, Bowen suggests that the new location and arrangement might facilitate new relationships and new habits—a more creative way of engaging with the world.¹⁷ Observing the odd way in which they end up sitting on the couch, facing each other with cushions piled all around, Roderick playfully notes that it is as if they are sitting “in the same boat,” across from one another (55). The image recalls the scene in Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*—which I discussed earlier—in which William Boot and Katrin assemble William’s canoe and “row” it on the floor of his lodgings in Ishmaelia. Waugh and Bowen both indicate that

¹⁷ In considering Bowen’s wartime London as a place for a new, and perhaps shared, engagement with things, I have been influenced by Deborah Parsons’ suggestion that Bowen’s wartime works create a new, more social version of the *flânerie* described by Baudelaire, Benjamin, and others. While the *flâneur* was a solitary soul apart from the crowd, feeling himself superior to it and detached from it, Bowen’s *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*) is one of many wandering souls, surveying the devastated city landscape but perhaps making new connections with others among the ruins (28).

the best response to a world in which things seem out of place may be to find new ways of using and relating with these things—to reobjectify them, in Brown’s terms, or, to use another word, to *toy with* them. The fantasy of being on a boat in the middle of the living room makes Roderick and, to some extent, Stella a child again.

Such moments of optimism and wonder are admittedly rare in the confusing, confused world of Bowen’s interwar and wartime Britain and Ireland. Still, people’s reactions to the destruction and loss lead Bowen, ultimately, to a guarded optimism about their ability to negotiate with the past, to make something of city ruins and forgotten things. The wartime story “Mysterious Kôr” also tells of a desolated London that looks “like the moon’s capital—shallow, cratered, extinct” (728). The three principal characters have the same diffidence with each other that most Bowen characters have; Arthur, a soldier on leave, and Pepita are lovers, but Pepita’s roommate Callie is the story’s “shadowy third” and keeps them from truly becoming close with each other. As Arthur and Pepita walk through the streets of the city, they discuss the lost city of Kôr from H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She*, which they have transformed into a piece of personal mythology. The idea of Kôr is frightening but can also be invigorating. Pepita, surveying the bombed landscape, remarks that “if you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it” (730). Bowen’s wartime works, expanding on themes and concerns from her novels of the thirties and late twenties, express the hope that something can be made of what remains after destructive events, that these things and places can be used in new ways.

I wanted to conclude this dissertation by discussing Bowen because her focus on inheritance and her continued attention to things through her works of the forties bring a hopeful note missing from some of the other writers' works. The other novelists I have discussed all mention the things that might remain after war. For Christopher Isherwood, it is Frl. Schroeder's broken dolphin clock and other strangely tasteless, but fascinating, items. For Jean Rhys, the cheap hotel rooms where her troubled women stay are all the same, and will always remain, telling the poor souls that stay in them that it is "quite like old times," still (*GMM* 9). Evelyn Waugh ventures farther into the future, in his 1933 short story "Out of Depth." In that story, a latter-day Rip Van Winkle travels five hundred years into the future and finds a London virtually unrecognizable from the one in which he grew up. The only remainder of his own time comes in little bits of detritus: "pieces of machinery and ornament...jewellery and purposeless bits of things" (*CS* 138). While these thirties writers all ponder the things that will remain after war and other traumatic cultural changes, along with the things that have remained through previous conflicts, Bowen engages with the question of how young people will continue to use these things and, perhaps, make the things their own. Though she voices the same ambivalence and fear about the future that Isherwood, Waugh, and Rhys do, Bowen also explores the question of what the future may hold for people as well as for things.

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VITA

Emily O'Keefe was born and raised in Ingleside, Illinois. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from McGill University in 2005, and her Master of Arts in English from Loyola University Chicago in 2006.

Emily has worked as an editor and writer. While at Loyola, she received a Teaching Scholars fellowship and taught several literature and composition courses. She lives in Rogers Park, Chicago.

